

## May Meeting Summary: Voices of Democracy with Rep. Sam McKenzie

5-28-2026 at the Tri-County African American Museum

We had the opportunity to meet our 2026 Helen Jernigan Memorial Scholarship winner, Chloe Smith. She told us some about her aspirations to become an author and/or illustrator or some aspect of healthcare as she continues her education at Roane State. Chloe has overcome a number of challenges in her young life; however, her goal is to help others and make a positive mark on the world.

We then heard from local candidates about their priorities and plans for office. The candidates (and top points) were: Anne Backus (public education, reversing vouchers, and family economics); Derek Guy (strong schools, local businesses/workers, infrastructure); Marty May (libraries, education, property taxes); Allie Simpson (education, health, and environment); Jason Goodman (affordable healthcare, education, moderation); Sharon Bourgeois Capshaw (attracting residents, schools, and the county animal shelter); Anna Golladay (affordability, housing, healthcare, workers rights, and redistricting); Ebony Capshaw (quality jobs, infrastructure, schools, and public safety); David Miller (redistricting, schools, growing Democratic candidates, cracking the super-majority).



Sam McKenzie, State Representative for District 15, spoke about the Tennessee General Assembly legislative session. Although he “officially” represents District 15, Sam considers himself the Democratic representative for everyone in this area. He welcomes phone calls (615-741-0768) and personal emails ([rep.sam.mckenzie@capitol.tn.gov](mailto:rep.sam.mckenzie@capitol.tn.gov)).

Rick Scarborough is a bit of a disappointment – he did not vote for vouchers the 1<sup>st</sup> year in office but did cast a decisive vote in favor of expanding vouchers this year. In this voucher bill \$273,000 family income is considered “low-income” for voucher awards. Bill Lee seems intent on separating the haves and the have-nots via private school subsidies (aka vouchers). In the previous voucher bill only 3 counties were piloted, and the students had to take the TCAT exams just like the public-school students. He noted that the public-school students outperformed the private in test results. In the

current bill there is no requirements for learning metrics – they should be present and comparable to public schools.

In immigration policy, the Tennessee GOP looked for ways to be the most heavy-handed and mean-spirited. The GOP does not have the American spirit in their hearts. McKenzie is for enforcing legal immigration, but the heavy-handed approach is not the way to do enforcement.

A careful reading of the recent Supreme Court decision regarding the Voting Rights Act shows that they allow politically driven gerrymandering – but not racially driven gerrymandering. McKenzie expressed his pride for people who showed up in Nashville to protest the Memphis gerrymandered redistricting. Tennessee is a very diverse state, with approximately 40% Democrats; however, that percentage is not reflected in the representation. In a level playing field, Memphis could swing the vote of the state. The GOP wants to redraw the state’s districts using data that is racially based. The DNC is exploring legal remedy – the GOP knows they did wrong.

He cautioned that Memphis and Shelby County are bellwethers for what they want to impose on the rest of the state. For instance, “oversights” on the schools that prevent Memphis/Shelby County from even hiring and firing teachers without going through the oversight board.

Voting rights restoration is an issue in Tennessee. In many other states, when someone is eligible to have their voting rights reinstated it happens. In Tennessee the person still has to pay back 100% of the court costs and back child support before their rights are reinstated. A very steep hill to climb for those returning from incarceration.

LGBTQ issues, particularly not recognizing gay marriage was held last year – not something they really wanted to address. This year the bill was brought into the session and passed, although there were several Republican lawmakers who also opposed it. There are already lawsuits filed, and McKenzie believes the bill will not stand.

Medical cannabis for the state is a bill introduced by Rick Scarborough. Open cannabis is not likely in Tennessee; however, medical is possible as a good tool for doctors to prescribe. If it is declassified at the Federal level we should be declassifying it at the State level also.

Increasing turnout should be a key goal for all Democrats. We need to have good data, but also we need to look at our approach. Democrats tend to be very analytical and Republicans tend to act from emotion. We need to look long and hard at our approach. It feels to him that the momentum is shifting in Washington – we need to do everything we

can to shift it here in Tennessee. We must want good schools, healthcare, a strong economy, and democracy more than the other side wants to eliminate them.

Sam McKenzie, a member of the Tennessee Black Caucus of State Legislators, served as chairman during the 113th General Assembly. Since 2020, he has represented District 15 in Knoxville and serves on the Education Committee, Health Committee, Government Operations Committee, and the House Ethics Committee. Prior to his current role, he served on the Knox County Commission from 2008 to 2016.