

## Legislative Update With Sam McKenzie

May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 5:30pm at the Clinton Community Center

At the beginning of the meeting Rose Weaver told us about the upcoming Juneteenth/Freedom Day celebration happening on June 15<sup>th</sup> at the Old Scarboro School Site on Hampton Road from noon to 6:00pm. We also welcomed Glenda Whitfield, the East TN Vice-President for the TFDW, and Edee Webb, the new President of the TFDW. Edee congratulated the ACDWC on our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Sam McKenzie, the Tennessee State Representative for District 15 in the Tennessee General Assembly and the Chairman of the Tennessee Black Caucus of State Legislators, spoke to a well attended ACDWC group about the recent legislative session.



Sam attended Austin-East High School in Knoxville before graduating from Fisk University with a B.S. in Physics. After Fisk University, Rep. McKenzie graduated from the University of Memphis with a M.S. in Physics. Currently, Rep. McKenzie is retired from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory where he was the Environment, Safety, Health, and Quality Group Leader. He is currently a small business owner in Knoxville. He is on the Board of Directors at Tennova Healthcare, ORNL Federal Credit Union, and the Fisk University Board of Trustees. He is also the former District Representative for the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and a member of Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, Beta Theta Boulé.

Prior to serving in the Tennessee General Assembly, Rep. McKenzie was on the Knox County Commission from 2008 until 2016.

Rep. McKenzie expressed his appreciation that Anne Backus is running against John Ragan. He related that Rep. Ragan repeatedly presents bills to cure a problem that doesn't exist. An example was the DEI issue that resulted in the total defunding of the DEI program at UT. He also related that Ragan sponsored legislation that would forbid the discussion of any aspect of reparations for past slavery related issues. Sam shared that stopping bad bills was a lot of what the progressive parts of the legislature spend time on, and John Ragan is one reason we're moving backward as a state in many statistics.

Despite the dismal legislative session, Rep. McKenzie was pleased with the watered down red flag law, also called Jillian's Law, which does provide some limited protections in regard to mentally unbalanced folks who shouldn't have access to guns. Jillian's Law was named for a student shot and killed by a mentally ill person who was released before being adequately diagnosed. He expressed frustration that UT could work out how to solve dormitory shortage

with purchased hotels; however, the state cannot do similar creative problem solving to address prison overcrowding.

Sam feels that the treatment of Tennessee State University was extremely harmful. The leadership was entirely removed based on allegations of fiscal irresponsibility. Nothing was said about the severe underfunding of the historically black institutions in Tennessee.

The one big victory in the last session was the defeat of the voucher program espoused by Governor Lee. Rep. McKenzie is convinced that the Governor is totally opposed to public education, and might just hate public education. Lee comes across as a nice guy but has been attacking public schools at every opportunity.



One topic the legislature is wrangling over is how we assess state taxes for corporations, such as Alcoa. Many corporations want incentives from the state (to the tune of \$1.2 billion) in addition to lower taxes. The corporations, and their friends in the legislature, don't want the actual numbers made public – only reporting in wide bands that tops out at “more than \$10,000.” FedEx is probably closer to \$10 million than \$10 thousand.

We also learned about the bill to arm teachers in the public schools (does not apply to private schools). Parents cannot be told who is armed, and law enforcement is only told the teachers' names. How a police officer is to know who Miss Jones is and why is she holding a gun is yet to be determined.

The teachers who want to carry a weapon will not be taught how to defend their weapon so it cannot easily be taken by an offender, which is something the police training covers with great importance. At least, there are provisions in the law for a background and mental health check, and the requirement that the teacher has an enhanced carry permit. Rep. McKenzie is very glad that Knox and Anderson County have so far declined arming their teachers.

To break the current super-majority, we need to get 10 more Democrats elected – and retain the 25 we already have. 75% of the house races have a Democrat on the ballot. Rep. McKenzie will be part of the yellow bus tour on June 3.