



Press Release

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Region's County Mayors bring issues to Nashville in historic trip

Regionalism went on the road when seven of our region's county mayors traveled to Nashville.

Governor Bill Lee referred to the trip as historic and told the group this is the first time any region's county mayors have traveled to Nashville as a cohesive group. County mayors from Carter, Greene, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Washington and Unicoi counties discussed the trip for about a month before setting their own legislative agenda and lining up meetings with commissioners from several state agencies.

"Each mayor had an opportunity to discuss projects that are important to their counties with both the Governor and Commissioners," said Sullivan County Mayor Richard Venable. "It was very significant that we had so many of our legislators meet with the group to discuss county-specific issues that benefit the region as a whole."

Topics discussed were economic development initiatives in a post-COVID environment, mental health, workforce re-entry for prisoners, opioid litigation and tourism.

"We have a lot of projects up here that will have impact across county lines," said Washington County Mayor Joe Grandy. "When we approached various offices about meeting with us, it raised some eyebrows. But we approached it with an agenda of supporting each other in various projects, and that made a huge impact. I think seeing the seven of us walk into a room made an impact, but seeing us all actively supporting each other is what left an impression."

In addition to our region's legislators and the Governor, the group met with Comptroller Jason Mumpower, Commissioner of Finance and Administration Butch Ealey, Commissioner of the Department of Correction Tony Parker, Commissioner of Tourism Mark Ezell and representatives from the Department of Economic and Community Development, specifically Assistant Commissioner of Rural Development Sammie Arnold.

"We covered a lot of ground in two short days," said Carter County Mayor Patty Woodby. "Our tourism discussions, while targeted at bringing in groups for specific events initially, can only help showcase all our region has to offer. We want people to see our region and want to come back."

Getting in front of the right people hopefully spurred along projects that stalled due to COVID-19. Projects such as a welcome center in Unicoi County with improved parking and ranger station were in prior year budgets, yet didn't seem to be moving along.



Press Release

"It was good for the seven of us to be there together to show a united front for projects in our counties," said Unicoi County Mayor Garland "Bubba" Evely. "We went in there to meet with the folks who can help us make projects happen."

Since the trip, Evely received follow up calls regarding the Welcome Center project and said it appears to be moving ahead in the next few months.

His project wasn't the only one that saw immediate attention after the mayors returned home from Nashville.

"In Johnson County, we lost our probation office," explained Johnson County Mayor Mike Taylor. "Addressing that issue with the Commissioner of the Department of Correction was huge."

So huge in fact that the following week three assistant commissioners representing the Department of Corrections and Probation visited with Taylor in Mountain City to begin the work needed to bring the probation office back to Johnson County.

"This trip and how well it was received is a testament to our move towards regionalism," Taylor said. "Even though our counties are all different in regards to needs, we have many things in common such as workforce and tourism."

Hawkins County Mayor Jim Lee agreed that the whole trip seemed to attract a great deal of attention no matter whom the group met with.

"This trip made an impact," Lee said. "We brought up issues that need to get back on track, like funding for radio communications to keep our law enforcement and first responders connected on calls. We want them to remember we're up here in Northeast Tennessee, and we can make a trip to Nashville any time they forget us."