

Gatlinburg, Tennessee residents protest city officials' gag on wildfire discussion

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A group of Gatlinburg residents and their supporters are organizing opposition to the mayor's and City Commission's efforts to stifle discussion of the response to a wildfire that killed 14 people there late last year.

The Gatlinburg City Commission last month passed a resolution drastically restricting the basic democratic right of citizens to make public comments and raise questions at Commission meetings. Under Resolution 939 passed June 30, citizens would be required to submit no later than five days before a Commission meeting who they are and what question they want to ask if the topic is not on the Commission agenda. Comments or questions would be limited to three minutes.

Perhaps the most onerous provision is that elected officials can arbitrarily reject or refuse to respond to any or all questions.

"We've been asking questions, they sit at the panel and stare at us," Laura Meir, a member of Gatlinburg Wildfire Survivors, told Knoxville's WATE television news.

The group has been circulating a petition to have the resolution repealed. To date it has been signed by 2,400 people—a number made even more significant by the fact that Gatlinburg is home to just over 4,000 permanent residents.

Meir said elected officials have attempted to hide behind a gag order which never affected them. "They always say they can't talk because they're under this gag request," she said. "The odds of the timing is very strange to me.... Five days isn't a problem for me. It's the part that they can vote to decide which questions get asked and which ones don't."

Last year's fire began in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park near Gatlinburg, a popular tourist

attraction.

Starting at a spot called Chimney Tops, what might have been contained under normal weather conditions became a massive wildfire driven by strong winds of more than 80 miles per hour and fueled by extremely dry drought conditions. The blaze edged down the mountain reaching the outskirts of Gatlinburg. The center of the city, which contained the main tourist attractions, was spared, but the surrounding dry, wooded areas became what one fire department official called "The Apocalypse."

In the aftermath of the fire, two teenagers were initially held as suspects but were later released with all charges dropped. There is still no certainty on what caused the fire or why there were delays in emergency response.

Fourteen people were killed, some tourists and some local residents, and at least 175 others were injured. Approximately 2,400 structures were destroyed or damaged, costing an estimated \$500 million.

In the months since the disaster, residents have raised numerous questions: Why were warnings not sent out sooner? Why was the necessary evacuation of some 14,000 people slow in coming? Why were emergency warnings not sent out to cellphones?

The biggest question from many is why elected officials are not forthcoming with more information and seemingly intent on blocking efforts by the public to get answers.

Since the arrest of the two teenagers, government agencies have cited privacy rules surrounding juvenile court cases as grounds to deny requests for records that in any other circumstance would have been public.

Until the teens were released, information from the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) and the Gatlinburg fire and police departments was

withheld from the public. After a Sevier County judge ruled that such information should be released, state officials “sat on the judge’s ruling for three weeks and kept it secret until the *News Sentinel* obtained a copy,” the Knoxville newspaper reported June 27.

Since then, TEMA officials have given assurance that they will comply with the judge’s ruling, but they have not indicated how long it would take to release the records. Sevier County and Gatlinburg officials have merely stated that they are “reviewing” the ruling.

In the Gatlinburg petition, the group noted the timing of the city commission meeting resolution. “Conveniently just days before we learned the gag order did not include officials (who have been saying they could not give us any information regarding the wildfires that killed our friends and destroyed our homes) they passed this resolution to limit the types of questions we could ask. Our city just experienced the biggest devastation in the history of the State of Tennessee. We deserve to speak freely to get answers on safety, accountability and actions taken the days leading up to the Gatlinburg Wildfire and the efforts to rebuild,” the petition states.

Overall, Sevier County is much better off economically than Tennessee’s small rural and poor counties, thanks to the tourism generated by the Great Smoky Mountain National Park and other tourist attractions like Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, home to country music star Dolly Parton’s Dollywood, the largest ticketed attraction in Tennessee.

However, Sevier County residents who may find employment in the tourist centers may not be able to afford the \$100-plus-a-night hotel rooms. Median income for a household in the county was \$34,719. About 8 percent of the families and 11 percent of the population are living below the poverty line, including 13 percent of those under the age of 18, according to US Census figures.

Last year’s fire cut Gatlinburg’s tourism by more than a third, destroying the livelihoods of many residents and leading to budget cuts. Much of the local budget depends upon the so-called “amusement tax” and taxes on hotel and motel use. Hotel/motel tax revenue fell by 51 percent after the fire, though it has improved in the summer season. The state of Tennessee receives a large amount of revenue from the tourism towns in the east; Sevier County alone generates about

\$2 billion a year.



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