

The Tennessee Journal

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Lee looks to end stay-at-home order in May to 'reboot' economy

More than 6,200 Tennesseans have been infected with the coronavirus, and 141 have died since the first cases were confirmed five weeks ago. Gov. Bill Lee this week recommended public schools across the state stay closed for the remainder of the academic year and extended his state-at-home order through the end of this month. But he also announced plans to launch a "reboot" of the state economy beginning in May.

Lee said the ban on nonessential economic activity will be lifted in phases, though social distancing guidelines will remain in place until a vaccine becomes available. In the interim, widespread COVID-19 testing will be necessary to keep the virus from spreading amid increased personal interaction. Geographic considerations will also be taken into account, he said.

The governor said the state will start offering free testing conducted by the Tennessee National Guard and the state Health Department, regardless of whether people seeking them have symptoms specifically associated with the virus. Lee named a group comprised of legislators, commissioners, and the comptroller to oversee more than \$2.3 billion in federal coronavirus relief funds flowing to the state. The governor appointed Tourism Commissioner Mark Ezell to head a state task force on how and when to resume economic activity.

Meanwhile, the Democratic mayors of Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville, and Chattanooga, who have largely taken more aggressive steps in response to the pandemic, are forming their own group to consult about reopening urban economies. Nashville Mayor John Cooper said the groups will partner with the state.

Finance commissioner. Lee named Butch Eley, his chief operating officer and a former top campaign adviser, as his new finance commissioner. He succeeds Stuart McWhorter, who stepped down to head up the new "unified command" to respond to the coronavirus crisis in the state. The affable Eley was a longtime aide to Bill Boner, a former Democratic congressman and Nashville mayor, before embarking on a lobbying career (including as head of the Ingram Group), working as head of communications for Belmont University, and then founding Infrastructure Corporation of America.

Congressional races

Hagerty loans U.S. Senate bid \$2.5M, Flinn drops \$1.5M, Sethi adds \$400K

The self-funding spigots are opening in the Republican nomination contest to succeed retiring U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Maryville). While Bill Hagerty has been leading the way in drumming up outside contributions, the former U.S. ambassador for the first time kicked in his own money last quarter in the form of a \$2.5 million loan. After spending more than \$1 million, Hagerty finished the period with \$5.6 million on hand, thanks to his loan and \$1.2 million in outside donations.

Vanderbilt surgeon Manny Sethi raised \$419,500 in the quarter and kicked in another \$400,000 of his own money, bringing his total personal contributions to \$1.9 million since joining the race. Sethi spent about \$730,000 in the quarter and had \$2 million remaining.

Memphis radiologist and broadcaster George Flinn wrote a \$1.5 million check to his campaign in the first quarter, recorded no outside fundraising, and spent \$1 million. That's in keeping with his previous five congressional bids in which he spent a total of \$12.5 million.

Byron Bush, the Nashville dentist booted from the ballot last week, has been restored after an appeal.

Roe seat. After some slight adjustments, the field is now set for Republicans seeking to succeed retiring U.S. Rep. Phil Roe (R-Johnson City) in the 1st Congressional District in northeastern Tennessee. Former Roe intern Nichole Williams was initially ruled ineligible to run because she had failed to vote in three of the last four Republican primaries, as required by the GOP's bona fide standards. But state Republican Party Chairman Scott Golden returned her to the ballot after receiving letters vouching for her from state Rep. Jeremy Faison and Sens. Jon Lundberg, Frank Niceley, and Rusty Crowe — a leading candidate for Roe's seat.

The field of 16 Republican candidates includes former Kingsport Mayor John Clark, former Johnson City Mayor Steve Darden, Kingsport pharmacist Diana Harshbarger, state Rep. David Hawk of Greeneville, and Rep. Timothy Hill of Blountville.

Crowe landed \$203,000 in contributions in the days between announcing his bid and the end of the quarter. He received \$22,000 from current and former colleagues in the Senate, including Speaker Randy McNally and his predecessor, Ron Ramsey. He also received a contribution from prominent donor Stephen Smith.

Clark raised \$102,000, gave his bid another \$80,000, and spent \$61,500. Darden raised \$106,000 and loaned his campaign \$25,000 of his own money. Harshbarger loaned her campaign \$250,000 and raised nearly \$40,000 from outside donors. She spent \$231,500, most of it on advert through Kansas City-based Axiom Strategies. Hawk and Hill didn't join the race in time to raise any money in the first quarter.

Protest candidacy fizzles. Activist Justin Jones failed to gather the requisite 25 signatures of registered voters to qualify for the ballot in his long shot primary challenge of U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Nashville).

Legislative races

Democrats reject DeBerry's appeal to be restored to the primary ballot

Longtime state Rep. John DeBerry of Memphis this week appealed a decision by the state Democratic Party's executive committee to oust him from the primary ballot in August. It did not go well. The panel voted 40-24 to deny his appeal, meaning DeBerry won't appear on the ballot for the first time since 1994.

DeBerry's comments to the media after the initial vote to oust him last week did him few favors. He had blasted the party for expecting him to act like a "brainless idiot," said he had been "ambushed" by the challenge to his Democratic bona fides, and intimated racial undertones by claiming the ouster had been supported by "a group of people who don't look like us."

Two black members of the executive committee, Brandon Thomas and Hendrell Remus, spoke out against any racial motivations behind the move. Several others expressed deep disappointment in DeBerry for making opening remarks to the panel but refusing to answer their questions about his propensity to side with the GOP on issues like restricting access to abortion, creating a school voucher program, and supporting bills seen as hostile to the LGBTQ community. He also supported electing Republican Glen Casada as House speaker last year over the Democratic nominee.

While the comments during the debate were largely critical of DeBerry, Sen. Raumesh Akbari and Rep. Mike Stewart, the respective chambers' Democratic caucus chairs, spoke in support of keeping him on the primary ballot and allowing voters to decide his political fate. Committee member Bobby Bush argued the lack of Republicans on the ballot in DeBerry's recent campaigns has allowed for wide-scale GOP crossover voting.

It was a tough political week for the DeBerry family. The lawmaker's sister, Doris DeBerry Bradshaw, was ruled ineligible to run against freshman Rep. London Lamar in the Democratic primary in District 91 for failing to submit the signatures of 25 registered voters.

Open races. The decision to remove DeBerry from the ballot creates a sixth open House race this fall. The others not seeking re-election are all Republicans: Reps. Jim Coley of Bartlett, Martin Daniel of Knoxville, Bill Dunn of Knoxville, Timothy Hill of Blountville, and Andy Holt of Dresden. Dolores Gresham (R-Somerville) is the only member retiring from the Senate.

Coley seat. In the Republican contest to succeed Coley in House District 97, John Gillespie began the year with a nearly \$61,000 balance and raised another \$12,750 in the first quarter. The grant coordinator at Trezevant Episcopal Home spent about \$21,000. He is facing Brandon Weise, who works for the Shelby County Register of Deeds office. Weise hadn't yet filed a report.

Four candidates are vying for the Democratic nomination, including Gabby Salinas, who narrowly lost to state Sen. Brian Kelsey (R-Germantown) in 2018 despite a significant fundraising disadvantage. She raised \$12,000 in the quarter, spent about the same amount, and had \$41,000 remaining on hand. Allan Creasy, who fell well short against Coley two years ago, raised \$12,700, spent \$9,200, and had \$15,550 left.

Former elementary school administrator Ruby Powell-Dennis raised nearly \$28,000, including \$17,000 in contributions from herself. She spent about \$21,000 in the quarter and had just under \$10,000 remaining on hand. The fourth candidate, Clifford Stockton, reported about \$400 on hand.

Daniel seat. Former Knoxville mayoral candidate Eddie Mannis and real estate agent Gina Oster are left to compete for the Republican nomination to succeed Daniel after attorney James Corcoran decided to withdraw from the race. Neither had begun raising money in the first quarter. On the Democratic side, attorney Virginia Couch raised about \$7,000.

DeBerry seat. Tennessee's Anti-Skulduggery Act of 1991 requires the candidate qualifying deadline to be re-opened for a week if an incumbent withdraws after the filing deadline. State Election Coordinator Mark Goins said the law doesn't apply in DeBerry's case because he was disqualified, and other candidates were running in the primary. Two Democrats had filed to challenge DeBerry when he was still planning to seek another term: Torrey Harris and Anya Parker. Harris, a reproductive rights and AIDS advocate, lost to DeBerry by 21 percentage points in 2018.

Dunn seat. The race for the GOP nomination in District 16 features school board member Patti Bounds, a vocal opponent of the school vouchers bill sponsored by Dunn, and Michele Carringer, a county commissioner. Carringer raised \$16,600 and spent \$129 in the quarter, while Bounds brought in \$8,100, spent nearly \$2,500, and had \$9,300 remaining on hand. Democrat Elizabeth Rowland hadn't started fundraising yet.

Hill seat. It wasn't until shortly before the filing deadline that Hill announced he would forgo re-election to his District 3 seat to instead seek the Republican nomination to succeed retiring U.S. Rep. Phil Roe. Former state Rep. Scotty Campbell and Tennessee Army

Tennessee News Digest

- Nissan leaders in Japan are reportedly considering a restructuring plan to account for the reduction of about 1 million vehicles from its annual sales target. Reuters estimates the change could lead to the closure of up to four assembly plants around the world. Nissan has made vehicles in Smyrna since 1983 and engines in Decherd since 1997.
- Volkswagen joined Nissan in furloughing production workers because of

COVID-19. The German automaker said it hopes to have Chattanooga employees back to work within four weeks.

- Nashville-based Bridgestone Americas has reopened U.S. plants, including factories in Dyersburg, LaVergne, and Morrison that employ 2,200.

- Tennessee airports will receive \$124 million in federal coronavirus relief funds, including \$55 million for Nashville, \$26 million for Knoxville, \$24 mil-

lion for Memphis, and \$6 million for Chattanooga. The \$13 million balance will be divided among the remaining 63 airports around the state.

- Collinwood, Covington, Decaturville, Dunlap, Halls, Hartsville, Madisonville, Somerville, South Pittsburg, and Whiteville have been selected to participate in the state Department of Economic and Community Development's two-year Tennessee Downtowns program.

National Guard Lt. Col. Neal Kerney are seeking the GOP nomination in the heavily Republican district. Kerney is a former University of Tennessee football player who unsuccessfully ran for the House in 1996 and 2004 and the Senate in 2016. Neither had yet engaged in fundraising before the end of the quarter.

Holt seat. Five Republicans are running for the northwestern Tennessee seat being vacated by Holt: Tandy Darby, Dennis Doster, David Hawks, John McMahan, and Keith Priestley. Doster unsuccessfully challenged then-state Sen. Roy Herron (D-Dresden) in 2004, while Hawks came up short in his bid against then-Rep. Mark Maddox (also D-Dresden) in 2006.

Byrd challenge. If embattled Rep. David Byrd of Waynesboro emerges from a three-way GOP primary, he won't have to face Christi Rice, one of the former high school basketball players who accused the lawmaker of sexual misconduct when he was their coach in the 1980s. Rice failed to submit copies of her filing petition in each of the four counties comprising District 71.

Hawk's money. Rep. David Hawk, who is running for both the open 1st Congressional District seat and re-election to the state House, spent \$9,750 in the quarter and had \$119,600 remaining in his state account. He's technically not allowed to transfer the money into his federal race, but there's nothing to stop him from spending heavily on the state level even though he doesn't have a primary or general election opponent.

Gresham seat. In the contest for the only open state Senate seat, former Agriculture Commissioner Jai Templeton and former state Rep. Page Walley are vying for the Republican nomination to succeed Gresham.

Walley raised \$30,900 from outside sources, including \$3,200 from Shelton Wilder, the son of the late state Senate Speaker John Wilder (D-Mason), \$3,000 from the Wine and Spirits Wholesalers, and \$500 from former state Rep. Steve McDaniel (R-Parker's Crossroads). Walley also loaned his bid \$20,000 and had \$51,000 remaining after spending just \$41 in the quarter.

Templeton raised \$25,600 from donors, including \$10,300 from University of Tennessee President Randy Boyd's political action committee (Boyd and Templeton were both Cabinet members in Gov. Bill Haslam's administration) and \$3,000 from state Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson's PAC. Templeton also loaned his campaign \$25,000, spent \$10,600, and had \$40,000

remaining. Civil Miller-Watkins, the only Democrat running, hasn't yet filed a disclosure. The district comprises Chester, Decatur, Fayette, Hardeman, Hardin, Haywood, McNairy, and Henderson counties.

Dickerson contest. Sen. Steve Dickerson (R-Nashville) ran away with his 2016 re-election bid despite a solid majority of his district voting for Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton over Republican Donald Trump. Dickerson has broken with many of his GOP colleagues by sponsoring bills to legalize medical marijuana and sports gaming, while opposing issues like school vouchers.

While many of Dickerson's policy positions resonate with Democratic-leaning voters in his district, the senator is also a defendant in a \$50 million lawsuit filed by state and federal authorities. The complaint alleges now-shuttered Comprehensive Pain Specialists, which Dickerson co-founded, profited from "largely unnecessary" urine drug testing. Dickerson in court filings denied submitting false claims. The parties agreed last week to delay court deadlines to June 15 while they engaged in mediation and settlement talks.

Dickerson's legal troubles combined with rising anti-Trump sentiment in Nashville are giving Democrats hope they might have a chance at taking back the seat. The two Democrats vying for the nomination are Heidi Campbell, mayor of Nashville satellite city Oak Hill, and education consultant Kimi Abernathy.

Abernathy got the earlier start, raising more than \$64,000 last year. She added another \$22,500 in the first quarter, spent \$14,700, and had more than \$50,000 remaining. Campbell raised \$65,500 in her first quarter in the race, spent about \$2,500, and had \$64,000 remaining. Dickerson was covered by the fundraising ban for sitting lawmakers in the quarter, during which he spent about \$9,900. He had about \$147,500 remaining on hand.

Stevens challenge. Sen. John Stevens of Huntingdon is facing a Republican primary challenge from Casey Hood, whom the Obion County Commission appointed as the interim replacement for former Rep. Bill Sanderson (R-Kenton) last year. In a four-way Republican primary for the House seat in November, Hood came in second to Rusty Grills, who went on to win the general election. Hood, the owner of a plumbing business and duck guide service, has yet to raise any money. Stevens had \$117,700 on hand.

Tennessee Notes & Quotes

■ “It’s kind of hard to believe there was just two deaths.” — *Chattanooga Mayor **Andy Berke** to Gov. **Bill Lee** after touring tornado damage on Tuesday.*

■ “Unfortunately, we have a lot of practice with what’s happened over the past 30 days.” — ***Lee** about the swift turnaround of tornado damage assessments for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.*

■ “We need money! We need that stimulus check now!” — *A man in a pickup truck shouting at the governor and his entourage touring storm damage in Hamilton County, per a pool report by **Kimberlee Kruesi** of *The Associated Press*.*

■ “People are dying. We have trailers outside they’re putting body bags in, and we have ice tents because we’re out of trailers. People are dying because the system cannot sustain.” — *State Sen. **Katrina Robinson** (D-Memphis) to WREG-TV about her experience working as an intensive care nurse in New York City amid the coronavirus outbreak.*

■ “Team Hagerty will continue to volunteer in Tennessee as we fight the spread of the coronavirus and deal with its effects. I look forward to returning to the campaign trail soon.” — *Republican U.S. Senate candidate **Bill Hagerty** on being named to an advisory board on re-opening the economy by President **Trump**.*

■ The Tennessee Education Lottery Corp. voted unanimously on Wednesday to approve rules governing the state’s new online sports gaming program. The sticking point had been a months-long debate over limits on sportsbooks’ generosity toward gamblers. **Rebecca Hargrove**, the Lottery’s founding president and CEO, had initially argued for setting a payout cap of 85 cents on every dollar wagered. After pushback from the gambling industry, the Sports Wagering Advisory Council recommended setting that limit at 95% (though some members strongly advocated for letting the market decide payouts). Senate Speaker **Randy McNally** (R-Oak Ridge), who voted against the sports gaming legislation, then intervened to call for a 90% cap, which was what the Lottery ultimately approved.

■ **Hargrove** said sportsbook applications should go live next week, and the Lottery will then have 90 days to either approve or deny them. That means betting should begin by the end of July. That’s a relief to supporters of the legislation, as some feared the dragged-out negotiations could cause the program to miss the start of the lucrative college and pro football seasons. Provided COVID-19 allows them to start on time.

■ **James “Woody” Brosnan**, a retired Tennessee statehouse and congressional reporter for the *Commercial Appeal*, died at his Silver Spring, Md., home after a battle with brain cancer. Brosnan moved from Memphis to the Nashville bureau in 1979 and was assigned to Washington five years later. He clashed with what he saw as news managers’ increasingly “insular and provincial” outlook at the paper, leaving in 2003.

■ “If there is no reasonable way for the public to access the public records, the public cannot use them to oversee governmental activities.” — *Knoxville Chancellor **John Weaver** in ruling that the Knox County Sheriff’s Office wrongly denied access to immigration enforcement records sought by University of Tennessee sociology professor **Meghan Conley**.*

■ Gannett stock tumbled below \$1 a share on April 2, which is bad for stockholders (and even worse for those running the company). It also provides an interesting case study in just how much the value of newspaper companies has tumbled in recent years. In 2014, a Nashville group led by former publisher **Craig Moon** offered Gannett roughly \$125 million for *The Tennessean*. The proposal was rejected.

■ As of Wednesday, the entire Gannett newspaper chain was worth about \$125 million, with the important caveat that if someone were to buy all of the company’s stock, they’d also have to assume the \$1.8 billion in debt used to merge with the Gatehouse chain last year — a figure that seemed high when the deal was announced and astronomical now.

■ Gannett began furloughing most of its workforce this month, forcing journalists to take every fourth week off, unpaid. After selling off all of *The Tennessean*’s land and buildings two years ago — the real value behind **Moon**’s appraisal — who knows what *The Tennessean* would sell for today. But it’s safe to say it would be a fraction of the offer on the table in 2014.

■ **Clarence Vaughn**, the executive director of Knoxville’s Police Advisory & Review Committee since 2016, has resigned to become director of diversity and community relations at UT’s Haslam College of Business.

■ Two suggestions for the pandemic book club: London-based Reaktion Books has released *The Kinks: Songs of the Semi-Detached* by Middle Tennessee State University history professor **Mark Doyle**. And Ballantine Books is publishing *The Road from Raqqa* by Nashville-based writer **Jordan Ritter Conn**, which chronicles the reunion of two brothers, one of whom remained in Syria and the other who moved to the U.S. and eventually opened Cafe Rakka in Sumner County.

■ Memphis Mayor **Jim Strickland** said the former home of the *Commercial Appeal* will serve as an overflow COVID-19 hospital. Gannett sold the paper’s long-time home in 2018 for \$2.8 million.

■ For a paper sometimes derided as the *Comical Appeal* — or even the *Communist Appeal* — it’s probably a good thing it moved. Otherwise, the paper may have been tagged with a new nickname: *Corona Appeal*.

■ Somehow amid the flood of COVID-19 news, we missed that this month’s Mule Day in Columbia was canceled. An election year without getting to see candidates uncomfortably riding mules or parading on foot while having to carefully choose where they step?

■ That’s a real kick in the ass.