

Council opposes state proposal to change local elections

The Dickson City Council has gone on record opposing a state proposal to force municipalities to hold partisan elections and change their election cycles.

At its March 2, 2026, meeting, the Council unanimously approved Resolution #2026-22 expressing opposition to House Bill 1497/Senate Bill 1630 currently under consideration in the Tennessee General Assembly.

Sponsored by Rep. Scott Cepicky of Culleoka and Sen. Joey Hensley of Hohenwald, the bill would require all municipalities to move their city elections to either the August county general/state-federal primary election or November state-federal general election in even-numbered years.

Under its charter, the City of Dickson currently conducts municipal elections on the second Thursday of September in odd-numbered years.

The 2026 bill also proposes to require candidates for all city offices, including Mayor and City Council in Dickson, to run as Republicans or Democrats in primaries to be held in May or Independents on the August or November ballot.

The Dickson County Republican and Democratic parties have decided to conduct primaries for most county and judicial offices on May 5 with the winners to be on the ballot with Independent candidates in August. Since nobody qualified as a Democratic candidate for any local office, there only will be a Republican primary.

City Administrator David Travis and Mayor Don L. Weiss Jr. told the council the proposed bill would force the city to do the same.

“It came to our attention that there was some legislation trying to be passed that would require all city elections to be a partisan election,” Travis said. “Plus, it also forces us to be in line with either the August or November schedule, which would cause more confusion because then the City of Dickson is trying to have a vote the same time that Dickson County’s having a vote. A lot of people still have trouble differentiating which community they’re voting in.”

Administrator Travis said he and Mayor Weiss discussed sending a letter to the city’s legislative delegation expressing opposition to the bill, but want to have the council’s endorsement of a resolution.

“We would not send a letter unless this body approves this resolution opposing a partisan municipal election and the movement of our election dates to the August or November election to coincide with either county and state elections or federal elections,” Mayor Weiss said. “The bill that this resolution addresses has both of those topics combined into one bill. So, we felt like before we could say anything to our legislators, we needed some guidance from this body as to your preference.”

If the bill passes, the City Council would decide whether to hold municipal elections in August or November of even-numbered years. The terms of the mayor and current council members scheduled to expire in October 2027 would be extended to the new election date in 2028 and the terms of the council members scheduled to expire in October 2029 would be extended to 2030.

In making the motion to approve the resolution opposing the bill, Councilperson Stacey Levine (3rd Ward) said local elections should not be partisan.

“One of the many reasons I enjoy serving on this council is that it is a non-partisan position,” Councilperson Levine said. “I think it helps us better serve our constituents.”

“There’s really no issue that we address here locally that (partisanship) even applies to,” Mayor Weiss said. “A pothole is a pothole. Picking up trash is picking up trash. Paving a street is paving

a street. Putting up a streetlight is putting up a streetlight. Keeping our parks clean is keeping our parks clean. Partisanship doesn't play into those type things."

Mayor Weiss told the council that Councilperson Dwight Haynes (4th Ward), who was absent due to illness, expressed his support for the resolution to oppose the bill. The council unanimously approved the resolution, which was forwarded to Rep. Mary Littleton, Rep. Jody Barrett, Sen. Kerry Roberts and the members of the House and Senate State and Local Government committees that are considering the bill.

In 2010, the General Assembly approved a bill authorizing municipalities to change their election cycles by ordinance without having to go through the process to change their charters in the hope it would increase voter turnout. In Dickson County, Charlotte moved its elections to August and Burns, White Bluff, Vanleer and Slayden moved elections to November. Only Dickson maintained independent elections.

In 2018 the Dickson City Council approved a resolution opposing a proposal to force all cities to change their elections. The General Assembly commissioned a study by the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR) and its 2019 report recommended "the Tennessee legislature should continue to authorize, rather than require, municipalities with private act or general law charters to change their election date by ordinance to either the August or November general elections in even-numbered years."

Citing testimony from a representative of the City of Dickson, the TACIR report specifically cites potential issues "because the City of Dickson is located in Dickson County, combining city and county races on one ballot would add to existing voter confusion about the difference between the local governments and the distinction between city and county races and initiatives on the ballot. Therefore, it is better for the City of Dickson to hold its election at a different time than the county election."

With several other cities testifying against the bill, the TACIR report concludes "local government representatives say they understand their communities' issues and needs, and if they are willing to pay for their elections, they should be allowed to decide when to hold them."

The bill did not pass in 2019.

In a House Elections and Campaign Finance subcommittee meeting Tuesday, March 3, members from both parties debated the proposal to make municipal elections partisan.

Rep. Jason Powell of Nashville, the lone Democrat on the seven-member subcommittee, said he believes it benefits municipalities to keep elections non-partisan. Rep. Cepicky, the bill's sponsor, said requiring candidates to declare a party affiliation gives voters a better understanding of the candidates.

"I've never met a pothole that is a Republican or a Democrat," Rep. Powell said. "I've never met a downed power line, that a lot of my constituents dealt with just recently, that is a Republican or a Democrat. I've never dealt with a water and sewer issue that was a Republican or a Democrat. And I don't think that either the Republican platform or the Democratic platform addresses those kinds of issues. I think we have city elections whenever people want to have them and we should let locals decide that. It's in their best interest to have the locals to decide this, not have us dictate that to them."

Rep. Rush Bricken of Tullahoma said he believes combining city elections with county and state elections will save money but feedback he has received about partisan local elections has been mostly negative.

"I'm not sure that it's that broken that it needs to be fixed," Rep. Bricken said.

Rep. Bricken said if changing the election cycles and partisan elections could be broken into separate bills, he could support the former but not the latter.

Rep. Dan Howell of Cleveland said several municipalities in his district have charters that specify their elections are to be non-partisan.

Josh Houston of the House legal services said if passed, the bill would override municipal charters with regard to their election dates and partisan elections.

“Regardless of what their charter says, it would require them to have partisan elections,” Houston said, explaining that municipal charters are authorized by the legislature and can be overridden by the General Assembly.

With subcommittee members having more questions about the bill, Rep. Dave Wright of Corryton asked if a vote on the bill could be delayed and if the bill could be amended to separate the two issues.

Rep. Cepicky agreed to postpone a vote on the bill and it was rescheduled to the next subcommittee meeting on March 10. The bill is scheduled for discussion in the Senate State and Local Government Committee that same day.