**'They're opposed to government. But now they are the government.' One county's hard-right shift**

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GALLATIN (AP) — Shortly after being sworn in last fall, the new majority of the Sumner County Commission in Tennessee acted to update one of its official documents. The new version said county operations would not only be orderly and efficient, but "most importantly reflective of the Judeo-Christian values inherent in the nation's founding."

It was an important moment for the 14 commissioners who had campaigned under the banner of the Sumner County Constitutional Republicans. The group had waged a political war on fellow Republicans in this fast-growing region north of Nashville during a bitter primary a few months before.

Since taking control, that majority has halted plans for a new building, rejected federal grants and sought to give away a historical property, actions it said were in line with its commitment to fiscal responsibility. The group also has been involved in an escalating feud with the county's election commission.

The early moves have been cheered by their supporters, but some Republicans and community members say the commissioners are operating outside political norms, inviting lawsuits and jeopardizing elections and other county operations.

"What's happened here is the Sumner County constitutional conservative Republican group, they don't believe in government," said Baker Ring, a Republican who is serving his fourth term on the county commission and is not aligned with the new majority. "They're opposed to government. But now they are the government."

The tensions are similar to those playing out in communities across the United States where conservative groups have been running candidates for local offices in recent years and sometimes winning majorities, upending the way local governments operate.

While their success at winning office has varied, the consequences when they do are becoming apparent in places such as Sumner County, where they can wield power — such as budgeting authority — that could have implications for how elections are run.

"If we don't fund it, you don't get to do it," one county commissioner, Jeremy Mansfield, told the election administrator and chair of the election commission during a contentious meeting last fall.

In Sumner County, a 22% increase in population between 2010 and 2020 has led to a need for more government services, including schools and teachers, while providing an opportunity for the local Constitutional Republicans group to gain power.

Eight Republican commissioners were defeated in the May 2022 primary by challengers aligned with the Constitutional Republicans. That paved the way for the group to form the majority after an August general election in which less than 15% of registered voters cast ballots. A key issue that helped fuel the rise of the group were two property tax increases approved by the county commission over the past decade or so.

When the county's election administrator came before the commission last fall seeking money to pay election workers for the November midterms, commissioners refused and pointed to money she still had in the bank.

The election administrator, Lori Atchley, has continued to ask, warning the commission that she is operating at a deficit because the workers had to be paid.

It was at that meeting that Mansfield, in his second term on the commission and an influential member of the Constitutional Republicans group, said two weeks of early voting, as required by state law, "just seems excessive for this county." When a fellow commissioner said the county would soon be adding vote centers — polling places where anyone in the county can cast a ballot — Mansfield replied, "Well, we can always change that, too."

Whether the county uses vote centers or has multiple early voting locations falls under the authority of the five state-appointed members of the county election commission, which hires the local election administrator. But county commissioners control funding, and the newly elected conservatives say the county's election budget is higher than comparable counties and that vote centers are hard to justify without proof that they will increase turnout.

The election office also is seeking money to complete its move to a larger building. That move is at the center of another dispute, with some of the new county commissioners saying it was not properly authorized.

In March, county commissioners voted to require the election department to vacate the building. The election commission responded by filing a lawsuit against the county, arguing that the dispute and forced move "threaten the integrity of the 2024 election before a single vote has been cast."

Mansfield said he would not describe elections in the U.S. as secure or trustworthy and he believes the local election administrator has contributed to an erosion of confidence in the community. Among other things, he pointed to a recent misdemeanor citation issued to Atchley over a private property dispute unrelated to her job.

"Elections should be about integrity and trust," he said.

Atchley referred questions about the lawsuit to the election commission's attorney and did not respond to a message seeking a comment about the citation and Mansfield's criticism. Tom Lee, the election commission's lawyer, said members regard the citation as a "private matter."

There have been no reports of large-scale election problems in the county.

Members of the Constitutional Republicans group said the elections department was not being treated any differently from other county departments when asked to justify their budget requests.

"People want small government and government they can trust," Mansfield said.

Elected to his first term last year, County Commissioner Wes Wynne is a Republican but not part of the new majority. He said he doesn't understand why there's been so much animosity between the county commission and election officials. He offered a motion that presented a compromise on using the larger building, but said it was ignored.

"So far, our commission has done a fabulous job at grinding every ax that they can find against people they don't like," he said.

https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2023/05/23/sumner-county-how-a-shift-further-right-is-unfolding-in-the-county/70245566007/