

Williamson meeting raises concerns that laws were broken

Kevin Walters, kewalters@tennessean.com 7:16 p.m. CDT September 12, 2014



(Photo: Submitted)

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FRANKLIN – Williamson County commissioners added a side of politics to their orders of chips and margaritas this month at La Hacienda Mexican Restaurant in Franklin.

But that Sept. 2 meeting of 10 county commissioners — advertised in a public notice as “an informal special meeting” — at the Hillsboro Road restaurant has raised concerns among some, including a state watchdog group, about whether state public meetings laws were broken.

County Commissioner Kathy Danner said she sought the La Hacienda meeting so she and commissioners could get to know one another better and chose La Hacienda as the place to spur more informal conversations outside of the meeting rooms at the county Administrative Complex.

And Danner said she took precautions to avoid breaking open meetings laws.

“Every commissioner I know has the highest personal integrity and would never do anything like (violate open meetings laws),” Danner said. “We didn’t know who was going to show up. Nobody was excluded. It was not a secret thing.”

Before the meeting, Danner met with a Williamson County board attorney to write the public notice and discuss state open meetings laws, which require elected officials’ meetings to be advertised and prohibit secret votes, among other requirements.

Commissioners did not vote on county business during the meeting, commissioners said. Instead, they had a casual, general discussion, including talk about a resolution in support of Amendment 1 on the Nov. 4 general election ballot. (That resolution was initially slated to appear on commissioners’ September agenda but was later postponed for a vote until October.)

Williamson County Commission Chairman Jack Walton, who attended the La Hacienda meeting, described the dinner as mostly “a listening thing.”

Since the meeting, Walton said he has received complaints from some residents who worried that the meeting broke state laws. Walton said he’s not in favor of future similar meetings, though he said he enjoyed this meeting.

“Although we did everything legally, it just doesn’t feel right,” Walton said.

Deborah Fisher, executive director of the Tennessee Coalition for Open Government, questioned if posting a notice of the meeting was enough to satisfy open meetings law requirements as far as the public goes.

“Just because they posted a notice of this doesn’t mean they were holding a meeting that accommodated the public and that was set up for the public to come to,” Fisher said. “That kind of meeting puts them at risk of violating state sunshine laws.”

Danner said she isn’t planning to ask for future meetings. But Danner said she wants Walton and the commission to hold more informal work sessions similar to ones of their counterparts at the county school board so commissioners might ask questions and get more information outside of committee meetings.

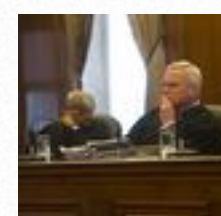
“I hope that (Walton) might see there’s enough desire for something like retreats or dinners so we can get to know each other better,” Danner said.

Reach Kevin Walters at 615-771-5472 and on Twitter [@thekevinwalters](https://twitter.com/thekevinwalters).

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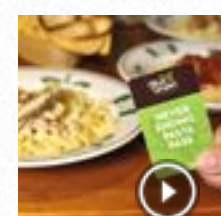
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