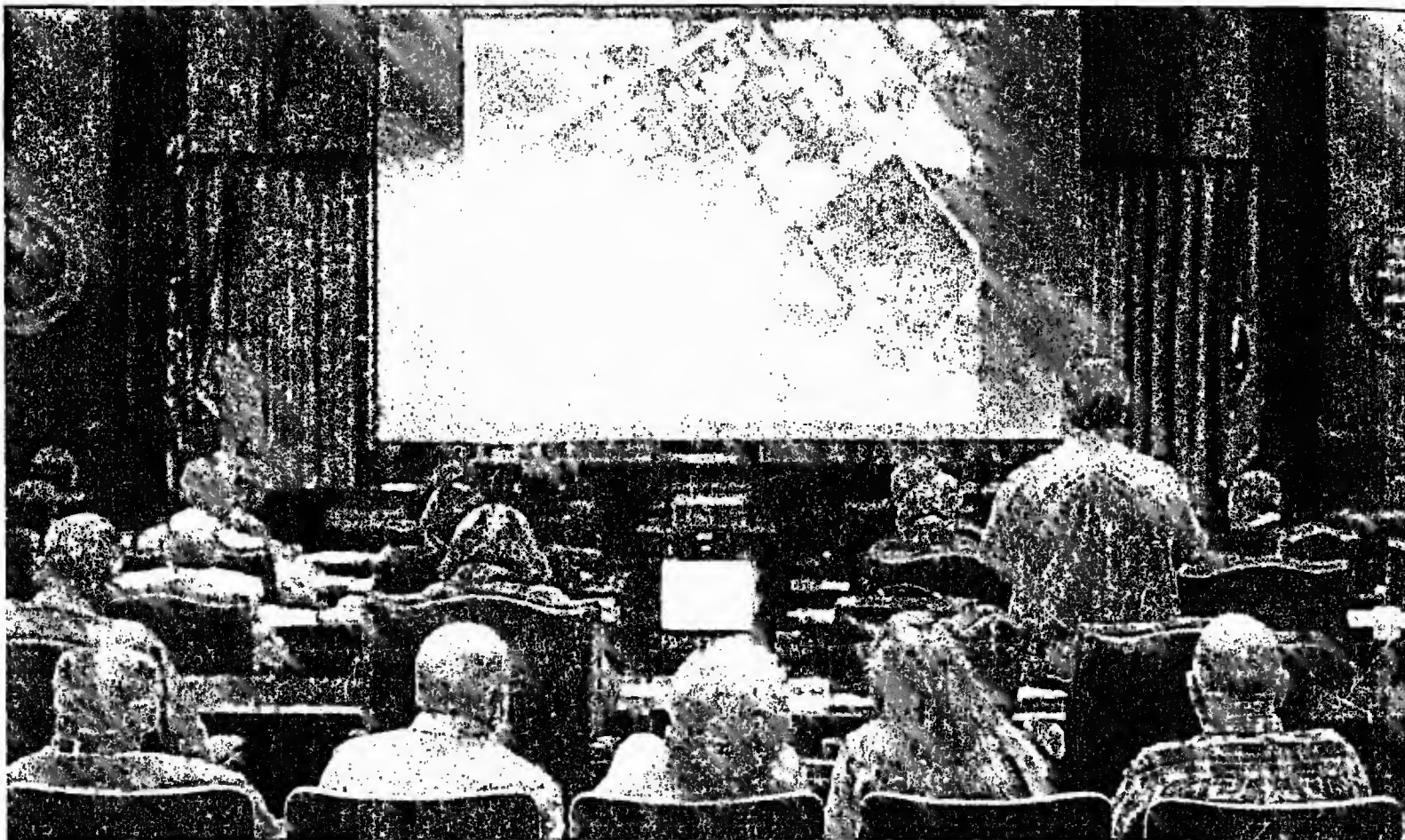
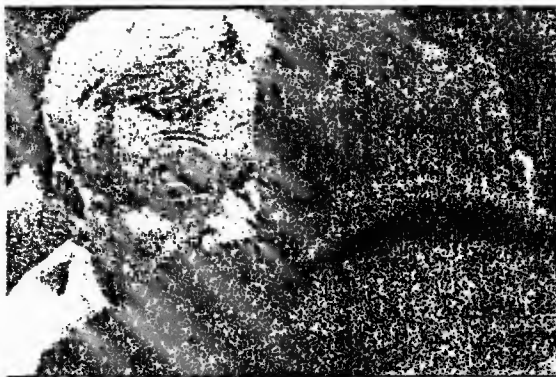


the commission



ANDRE TEAGUE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

A day with the Sullivan County Commission



ANDRE TEAGUE/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Sullivan County Commissioner Jack Sitgreaves discusses agenda items with a colleague.

BY JENNIFER WIG
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BLOUNTVILLE - It's 9 a.m. on the third Monday of the month.

Sullivan County commissioners gather in the commission room at the old County Courthouse.

They munch on ham-and-egg biscuits from Burger King and sip coffee, greeting each other amicably.

Commission meetings rarely begin on time.

On Aug. 3, voters will choose to retain or replace the 24 commissioners. The group will meet once more in August before new commissioners take office in September.

Few residents attend the

meetings. About 20 people - mostly officials - fill in the first two of 11 rows at the back of the room.

At 9:12 a.m., Mayor Richard Venable pounds a gavel on his desk, calling the meeting to order.

Three commissioners miss roll call.

One, Sam Jones, is traveling abroad. Two, Eddie Williams and Mike Surgenor, are out of the room.

Despite a microphone system, it's often difficult to hear the commissioners speak. Sometimes, the problem's made worse by the hum of conversation among other members.

A row of onlookers listens to discussion by Sullivan County commissioners during a recent meeting.

THERE'S MORE

Less than two weeks away from the Sullivan County Commission election and nearly a month after the start of the new fiscal year, the county still has no new budget. What's the holdup? Details on **Page B1**.

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COMMISSION: Writer looks at board's day

From Page A1

The ringing of cell phones doesn't help.

At 9:30, the first one rings. Commissioner Larry Hall of Blountville steps out to answer the call.

During the meeting, Hall answers his phone twice more.

Commissioner John Crawford's phone rings once, and Williams leaves twice to take calls.

Rezoning requests often take up the bulk of the commission's meetings. The discussions can be as brief as three minutes but have lasted up to three hours.

This particular Monday's rezoning agenda includes two items, both recommended for approval by the county's Planning Commission.

The first request would allow resident Paul Bryant to build a duplex.

A neighbor complains the project creates stormwater runoff, forming trenches in his yard.

County Planner Ambre Torbett said rezoning eventually would lead to the landowner making runoff improvements.

An hour-long debate about Bryant's water and sewage systems ensues.

During the discussion, cell phones ring six times. Commissioner Wayne McConnell of Kingsport answers his call at his desk.

Commissioners running for re-election say they want to bring more business and housing to the county.

The commission votes against the rezoning.

"We can't have any progress in Sullivan County," one commissioner says. "It's against the rules."

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Bryant says he's not surprised he lost, calling it a political decision.

"If you know somebody, you can get things done," he said. "If you don't, you're wasting your time. It's election time. I knew before the meeting started that my (application) was going to be turned down."

Discussion of the second request begins at 10:39 a.m.

Commissioner Ralph Harr of Bristol frequently calls items to question, meaning he calls for discussion to end and a vote to take place.

County Planner Torbett barely finishes a description of the second request before Harr speaks up.

"No opposition from the neighbors? Call to question," he says.

Unlike most local government meeting rooms, commissioners don't face the audience. Instead, their desks face the front of the room where a row of county officials, including the mayor, face outward.

Circuit Court Clerk Raymond Winters, who has worked for and with the county for 46 years, says the commission room was renovated from its use as a courtroom in 1989.

It was designed this way to accommodate large crowds, he said, but commissioners had their backs to the audience in the old commission room, too.

Identifying the 24 members - 23 of them white men - by the backs of their

'heads can be challenging even for those familiar with the commissioners.

Residents who attend the meetings usually leave after rezoning concludes.

After a 22-minute break, members move on to other business, quickly deferring or withdrawing five agenda items. Four others get passed with one vote.

Discussion first takes place about a resolution encouraging the state to affirm appointed school superintendents. At 11:10, the resolution's sponsor, Joe Herron of Kingsport, explains his reasoning.

At 11:14, Harr says, "Call to question."

As the noon hour approaches, discussion dwindles, and commissioners begin shifting in their seats, seeming restless.

Commissioners receive an invitation to lunch at the county Sheriff's Office training facility after the meeting.

They vote on the next six resolutions, Harr pushing for votes at 11:26 and again at 11:30.

At 11:46, commissioners comment on a resolution regarding the sale of county land for a landfill. Although the item's on the agenda only for review, some commissioners begin debating the plan.

But at noon, it seems hunger wins out over business.

"It's 12 o'clock," Harr says. "First reading. Let's have some lunch."

Another Sullivan County Commission meeting adjourns.

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