

Hamilton County Commission explains decision to shoot down firing range proposal

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Justin Whaley walks away from the planning notice sign proposing a special permit outdoor shooting range on Bakewell Mountain in north Hamilton County. The 184-acres are located on Retro Hughes Road.

Photo by Tim Barber /Times Free Press.

The Hamilton County Commission **shot down a proposed commercial firing range** on Tuesday morning.

Commissioners cited location as the primary drawback to plans for the \$2.4 million project, which has been in the works for more than a year.

Justin Whaley and Wade Batson of Dead Zero Shooting sought to operate a state-of-the-art outdoor range along Retro Hughes Road on Bakewell Mountain in the rural area northwest of Soddy-Daisy.

Batson, seated near the back of the commission room, nodded his head in acknowledgement as commissioners explained their reasoning for voting 8-1 against the special permit that Dead Zero needed to operate a range on the land.

"It's about location," District 6 Commissioner Joe Graham said. "It's not about the project. Please don't give up."

The area of the proposed range is one of the most isolated in the county. It does not have electricity, and residents get their water from wells.

But nearby landowners with homes or plans to build homes protested the range, saying it would pose noise, safety and environmental concerns.

"We thought we answered with the facts pretty well," Batson said after the meeting. "Unfortunately, I think the emotion won out, and it's hard to combat that."

Batson said Dead Zero is not giving up on the idea and the next step will be to find another location for the range.

"Obviously, the commission wasn't against the project as a whole," Batson said. "Their opposition was the location. We'd hoped to keep it in the county, but this wasn't a boost to the idea."

The range proposal is located in District 1, represented by Randy Fairbanks, who moved to deny the special permit.

Fairbanks said many of the emails he received about the proposal framed it as a gun rights issue. Fairbanks said he supports gun rights but asserted that location was the issue.

"I was elected to protect the citizens in my district and their property rights," he said. "That's what I'm trying to do in this situation."

Scott Phillips, who bought land on Retro Hughes Road in 2012 and now lives there with his wife and kids, said four commissioners came up to the family's property this weekend to get a sense for its proximity to the proposed range.

"If it would have been passed today, it would have changed everything, not only for us but for all the other families up there," Phillips said. "It would have shattered our dreams. The fact that the commissioners chose to deny this and encourage another location means the world to us."

The Regional Planning Commission **issued a negative recommendation** on Dead Zero's special permit application last month, ahead of **last week's** County Commission agenda session, where the matter was debated for more than an hour.

The County Commission's rejection of Dead Zero's proposal also highlights **the challenge** facing a Moccasin Bend firing range committee tasked with finding a new location for law enforcement personnel to shoot.

Chattanooga Police Department and Hamilton County Sheriff's Office leaders have expressed the desire for their new facility to feature an outdoor component and a **convenient location**.

Officers now use an aging 33-acre firing range on Moccasin Bend that city officials want to vacate and turn over to the National Park Service's Moccasin Bend National Archaeological District.

Sheriff's office chief deputy Allan Branum has said it would be easier to build a garbage dump in Hamilton County than a new outdoor firing range, while police Chief Fred Fletcher **surmised in 2015** that Grundy County might be the closest that an outdoor range could be built without objection.

The committee first met in November 2015 and has divided up into three subcommittees to work toward a solution after a proposed indoor range on East 12th Street was **abandoned in 2014**.

The City Council and County Commission **have continued authorizing spending** at the 38-year-old Moccasin Bend facility, despite the ongoing effort to move away from the location.

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