

Dinner. Coffee at Panera Bread. A walk along the First Creek Greenway.

Those are just a few of the events involving two or more school members for which public notice was given by Knox County Schools has officially notified the public about when two or more school board members were to attend.

But when three school board members went to Biloxi, Miss., in July to attend the National School Board Association's Southern Region Conference, no official public notice was sent.

According to district spokeswoman Melissa Copelan, the school system did not have to notify the public of the trip, taken by Karen Carson, Gloria Deathridge and Cindy Buttry, whose board term ended in August. It cost about \$5,000, according to records examined by the News Sentinel.

"We are not required to issue a public notice for events or activities that occur in which no public business is discussed or deliberated by Board of Education members," she said in a statement.

Copelan said the trip was announced publicly at the school board's April 2 meeting, which would have adequately covered the district, "but a specific public notice regarding the conference" was not issued.

"We put forth a good-faith effort to ensure public notices, in some form, are issued regarding special events and activities where we expect two or more Board of Education members could potentially be present," Copelan said.

"This rare and isolated instance was an unintentional oversight on our part."

Frank Gibson, a Tennessee open meetings law expert, said the school system is correct that it doesn't have to issue a public notice, but it's a good idea for officials to do so. Especially, he said, since they have set a precedent themselves of sending out public notices for events outside of meetings.

Gibson, a founding director of the Tennessee Coalition for Open Government, said the law states only that meetings where board members will be deliberating or moving toward a decision on something have be noticed.

"The Sunshine Law is there to protect the public from decisions made in secret, but also to protect the credibility of elected officials," he said.

Gibson said he thought it was good the school system sends additional public notices for activities members of the school board attend.

"... ideally if members are going to a conference, disclosing it removes any question or suspicion," he said. "There's nothing bad with more disclosure or openness."

The July 23-26 conference offered participants workshops and opportunities to meet with other school board members from the southern region, which includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee.

This year's workshops focused on using technology in the classroom, leadership development and board members and the law.

eight members originally set to go

Carson, the school board's chairwoman, said the July trip was the first time in several years board members had attended the southern region conference. The last time she went, she said, was about five years ago when it was held in Florida.

Several board members normally attend the National School Boards Association's annual conference, she said, but opted to attend the southern regional this year because the national conference — held this year in Boston — took place during the budget process. Deathridge said she was the only board member to attend the national conference this year.

According to records, initially eight members of the board and Superintendent Jim McIntyre were going to go to Biloxi.

The school system sent a \$5,055.77 check to the Beau Rivage Casino and Resort, where the gathering was held, to pay for three-night stays for each person and two extra days for Buttry.

All but Carson, Buttry and Deathridge ended up canceling and the system got its money back in September for those who didn't go.

According to records, Carson and Deathridge's hotel stays were both \$503.25, while Buttry's extra night at the hotel added \$294.86 to her tab.

Carson and Buttry drove to the conference, both getting reimbursed for mileage, \$500 and \$628.53, respectively. Deathridge flew to Mississippi at a cost of \$557.20, records show.

Carson was reimbursed another \$105 for meals during her stay, while Buttry was reimbursed another \$176 for meals.

Deathridge was reimbursed \$186 — \$176 for meals and \$10 for a taxicab ride.

The conference's registration was \$385 for each board member.

networking

Board members said there is a benefit to attending out-of-state conferences.

Carson said they can learn of other groups' successes and they can expand their vision of what works for Knox County. She said she didn't know an official public notice was not issued for the

Mississippi trip. She said she thinks the school system should send out notices when board members travel out of the state.

A review of the April 2 meeting shows that then-Chairman Thomas Deakins notified members that the Mississippi conference was coming up. But he did not state which members, if any, would actually attend.

Deathridge said the July trip was her first time attending the conference since joining the board. Professional development at such meetings helps officials learn how to be better school board members, she said.

"It's information-gathering and networking. We can kind of get to know each other, share and engage," she said. "You get a lot of what's happening nationwide, and I try to bring some of that information back and share it with different people."

She said she was unaware the district did not send out a public notice about the trip. Had one been sent, she said, it may have raised even more questions about the trip.

"Then, everybody is going to say, 'Well, why are you going? What is the purpose?'," Deathridge said. "It just brings up a lot of questions. But we're not doing anything wrong."

Deathridge said the public notices she thinks of are sent for meetings and activities that are more local, not out of state.

"I don't have a preference either way," she said.

Buttry said she was shocked to learn that the school system did not send a public notice that she and other board members were going on the trip.

"The school system has set the precedent, every trip has been sunshined," she said. "We've gone out of our way to make sure that happened. We pride ourselves on being above-board."

board: don't discuss business

Buttry, who was in Mississippi for four days, said she went an extra day to attend a number of pre-workshops at the conference. No one expressed concerns or objections with her going, even though she was leaving the board after eight years just a month later, she said.

Attending conferences, Buttry said, is an educational opportunity for board members.

"It was chock full of event sessions and seminars," she said. "If you look at the sessions, they speak for themselves and are laid out for you of what you can choose from."

Deathridge and Carson said the decision to travel was Buttry's.

"I didn't really know if Cindy was going or not ... and I didn't know her agenda," Deathridge said. "I just keep up with mine. We don't necessarily talk about who is going, when they're going and how they're going, unless we're going to ride together."

For example, this weekend several members of the board are in Nashville for the Tennessee School Board Association conference. At least three board members are riding to the conference together.

Board members said they do not discuss any business on the trips, which also give them an opportunity to get to know one another better.

"There's never ever been discussion of deliberations," Buttry said. "Either the conversations are about our personal lives and we're building relationships with each other or about what's happening at that conference."

Deathridge said when members are in Knoxville, they are limited in their interactions with each other. Rarely do they get to just enjoy each other's company.

"I think the better we get to know each other and understand each other, the better we can make decisions because we have a better understanding of who we are as individuals."

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#### Mississippi Expenses by School Board Member

Cindy Buttry

\$385 for conference registration

\$798.11 for four night stay at conference hotel

\$804 for reimbursements for mileage and food

Karen Carson

\$385 for conference registration

\$503.25 for three-night stay at conference hotel

\$605 for reimbursements for mileage and food

Gloria Deathridge

\$385 for conference registration

\$557.20 for airplane ticket

\$503.25 for three night stay at conference hotel

\$186 for reimbursement for food and a cab ride to the hotel

Source: Knox County Schools