

MINUTES

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
JOINT COMMITTEE ON ADVANCED COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

Meeting Jointly

Thursday, January 30, 2014

The Joint Interim Committee on Advanced Communications and Information Technology; Senate Interim Committee on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs; and the House Interim Committee on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs met jointly on Thursday, January 30, 2014, at 1:30 PM at the Historic Armory in Mena, Arkansas.

Senator Williams called the meeting to order and recognized Representatives Wilkins and Slinkard for comments.

Legislators in Attendance

The following legislators attended: Senator Eddie Joe Williams, Chair. Representatives Butch Wilkins, Chair, Mary Slinkard, Chair; Nate Bell, John Catlett, Jim Dotson, Stephanie Malone, David Meeks, and Chris Richey.

Area Broadband Internet Access Update

Ricky Cross, External/Legislative Affairs, AT&T, provided a history of Polk County's broadband internet access; and explained, at inception, one cyber fiber served Mena and the surrounding area. When that fiber incurred damages, the entire broadband system failed. Several times, due to the damaged wire, Polk County residents did not have access to broadband or 911 emergency services. To rectify this situation, AT&T recently installed a diverse-route fiber. Now, when damages occur to the primary fiber, broadband service diverts to the second fiber, eliminating most outages. Mr. Cross noted, AT&T is in the process of a broadband build out, creating more service options for residents in the Mena area.

Discussion of the Renovations to the Lodge at the Queen Wilhelmina State Park (QWSP)

Richard Davies, Executive Director, Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism (ADPT); Greg Butts, Director, Arkansas State Parks; Andi Fulmer, Senior Assistant to the Attorney General, Civil Agencies Division

Senator Williams asked the Committee to be sensitive to the fact that this matter is currently in litigation; and recognized Mr. Davies for comments.

Mr. Davies provided a brief history of ADPT and said the Department believes in adequately constructing and maintaining facilities. The QWSP Lodge is an important piece of the ADPT system, and they recognize the impact it creates on Polk County's economy.

Mr. Davies said the decision to call the bond on the QWSP Lodge renovation was not made lightly. However, ADPT management agrees the former contractor (Wade Abernathy, Inc.) was not making proper progress on the job and believes allowing a substandard construction job would cause future problems. Therefore, the Department stands firm in its decision. Recently, the project bonding company, Travelers, hired Nabholz Construction to take over the project. The project's estimated completion date is November 30, 2014.

Representative Bell said, the QWSP Lodge renovation project was scheduled to be a 422-day project. As of today, the project has been in progress for 22 months and construction is about 50% complete. Since the Lodge closed for renovation, more than two years ago, Polk County's revenue has been flat and area tourism has declined considerably. Representative Bell asked why the project is taking so long and what tools the legislature can provide ADPT to prevent situations like these in the future.

Mr. Davies explained, the policy, "low bidder is the best bidder" needs some examination. Regarding the project's timeline, insurance laws concerning hiring replacement bidders and allowing considerable time for disputes hinders progress on problematic construction projects.

Mr. Butts said the QWSP Lodge renovation concentrates on expanding rooms, installing wider windows, enlarging meeting rooms, improving restrooms, and installing energy-efficient technology.

Mr. Davies and Mr. Butts agreed it is likely Nabholz will meet the estimated November 30, 2014, completion date. They noted, incentives are in place for finishing early; disincentives are in place for not meeting the deadline. When construction is complete, ADPT needs about 25 additional days to install furniture, train staff, stock the restaurant, and implement a wireless network.

With no further business, the committees adjourned at 2:45 PM.