

Senate passes Tiger Haven bill

By Tom Humphrey

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NASHVILLE — After some joking, the state Senate approved 32-0 and sent to the House on Monday a bill authorizing Roane County officials to accompany Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency officers on their inspection trips to a facility housing tigers, lions, cougars and other large members of the cat family.

The bill — SB1192 — authorizes the Roane County executive or someone he designates with the county sheriff's office or the county emergency management agency to join TWRA inspectors in their visits to the Tiger Haven. TWRA is responsible for overseeing operations of facilities holding exotic animals.

Sen. Andy Berke, D-Chattanooga, asked sponsor Sen. Ken Yager, R-Harriman, what could be done after the bill passes that could not already be done under current law. Yager's response was to repeat his explanation of the bill, then add that the bill is 'a result of two years of discussion.'

Similar legislation was proposed last year and failed. Yager earlier told a committee that the intent is to address community concerns over operation of Tiger Haven without interfering with its operations.

The 50-acre sanctuary in eastern Roane County is currently home to 279 lions, tigers, leopards and other big cats that are considered abused, abandoned or neglected.

For years several nearby residents have complained about the noise of the animals, have voiced their concerns that animal waste is tainting wells and ponds and have worried that the big cats could escape.

The bill inspired joshing during the Senate Environment and Conservation Committee meeting, including Sen. Mike Faulk, R-Kingsport, offering an amendment to declare, 'Bengal tigers that are kept or maintained in Campbell, Fentress, Morgan, Rhea, Roane and Scott counties shall be allowed to run at large.' The listed counties comprise Yager's Senate district.

'What is this?' asked Yager when Faulk offered his joke amendment, which was never put to a vote.

When the bill itself was put to a vote in committee, Sen. Jack Johnson, R-College Grove, said he wanted his 'aye' vote recorded as 'aye of the Tiger.' He repeated the request when the bill came to the Senate floor, prompting Senate Speaker Ron Ramsey's one-word reply: 'No.'

The bill still awaits a vote in a House committee under sponsorship of Rep. Julia Hurley, R-Lenoir City.

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A compromise has been struck that could resolve one of the most heavily lobbied disputes of the legislative session — a measure to cut by \$16 million the fees big telecommunications companies pay for access to phone lines of small telephone companies.

As introduced, HB574 would have phased in a reduction in the fees from an average of 7 cents per minute to 2 cents a minute over a four-year period starting this year.

Under the compromise, approved by panels of both the House and Senate last week, the reductions would not begin until 2012, giving the small companies time to prepare for the losses. The phase-in of reductions would then proceed over the following four years.

The bill has been pushed by AT&T, cable TV companies and other firms who have registered more than 20 lobbyists. It was opposed by small telephone exchanges and cooperatives, mostly in rural areas, that serve an estimated 256,000 customers statewide.

The 2-cents-per-minute access fee would be the same charge now set by the Federal Communications Commission for calls made between states, which proponents of the bill said shows that rates are too high. Opponents had argued the measure would unfairly reduce small-company profits — and prompt higher charges to customers — while boosting big-company profits.

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