

# Public feedback backs new gun laws

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Nearly 10,000 people submitted feedback on potential gun and public safety legislation in the first two weeks after Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee solicited public feedback in May when announcing his plans to call a special legislative session on Aug. 21.



**Lee**

A majority of the input called for changes to Tennessee gun laws, mirroring state and national polling trends indicating a bipartisan majority of Tennesseans and Americans support increased gun restrictions.

In the feedback to the governor's office, many supported safe storage laws, expanded background checks and banning assault-style weapons, while those opposed to new laws ex-

pressed concern about opening the door for increased regulations down the road.

The Tennessean obtained through a public records request 9,850 submissions to a feedback portal posted by the governor's office and sorted entries into generally supportive of additional legislation around firearms or generally opposing new measures, with less than 500 entries not falling into either category due to

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# Feedback

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their content or lack of specificity.

## Responses from across the state

The responses poured in soon after the portal went live on May 5, as people shared their requests, concerns and questions regarding the potential for new legislation surrounding firearms and mental health in Tennessee at the expected August special session. As of June 20, more than 13,000 people had submitted feedback under their name and county of residence.

Those generally supportive of new laws sometimes expressed support for legislation previously floated by Lee that would establish a stronger emergency protection order in Tennessee, allowing a court to temporarily block individuals from accessing firearms if they're found to be a danger to themselves or others. Many said they wanted more than an emergency protection order, however.

A Williamson County resident, identified as a veteran who served three tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, urged the

governor to ban assault-style weapons, saying "no one needs assault weapons in civilian life." A first responder and "lifelong gun owner" from Sumner County said safe firearm storage should be incentivized.

"If I store my firearm in a manner that is not reasonably protected against theft, I should be responsible for damage that results," he said.

Those opposing new measures frequently pointed to the Second Amendment and the phrase "shall not be infringed." Out-of-state submissions wrote in opposition of new laws, while at least one person opposing new laws claimed the Covenant shooting, in which three children and three staff members were murdered, was a "false flag" hoax.

Many opponents expressed concern that any new gun legislation would open the door for wider restrictions down the road.

"Any gun control measures is too much — you will start the slippery slide to gun control across the board," said a Loudon County resident. "Taking away the rights of being an American citizen and a TN. resident. Please let us keep our freedoms. Bad people make bad choices BUT you want all good hard working citizens to pay the price."

All but one Tennessee county was represented in the submissions, with 832 submissions coming from out of state. Large, urban counties such as Davidson had the largest volume of input. However, when adjusted for population, a larger percentage of Williamson County residents weighed in on the issue, with more feedback spread across Middle and East Tennessee than West Tennessee.

## Governor wants to 'continue listening to Tennesseans'

"The special session on public safety will provide an opportunity to bring forward a number of practical, thoughtful proposals to keep Tennessee communities safe, preserve constitutional rights, prioritize due process protections, support law enforcement and address mental health," Lee spokesperson Jade Byers said in a statement. "In the months ahead, the governor will continue listening to Tennesseans and discussing solutions with legislators and stakeholders."

A number of people in opposition of new laws and the special session argued new laws can't stop people who are committed to hurting others.

"(It) will do nothing to stop criminals

from committing crimes and will only weaken the ability for law abiding citizens to protect themselves and others," said a Bradley County resident.

Though it hasn't been explicitly proposed, a few cautioned against writing in specific diagnoses or medications into potential "red flag" laws, including a Dickson County pharmacist who worried that it could stop people from seeking help.

"I have so many patients which are on medications and would never be a threat to society," the person wrote. "I do not believe we can lump a few classes of drugs into a category as being a red flag."

Though support for new gun legislation has largely broken along party lines within the General Assembly, the feedback to the governor's office revealed a more bipartisan swath of support for action. Self-identified conservatives and gun owners said they believed constitutional rights can be balanced with reasonable regulation of deadly weapons.

"I believe in gun ownership, but I believe it should be well regulated," said a Knox County resident. "That phrase is being ignored."

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