

Waco Tribune-Herald



VERY WARM WITH SUN & CLOUDS 103 • 78 FORECAST, A2 | FRIDAY, AUGUST 5, 2022 | wacotrib.com | IN GOD WE TRUST

Meek questions city's role on abortion

Mayor says Waco shouldn't weigh in on how enforcement is prioritized

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Anti-abortion speakers took the floor at Tuesday's Waco City Council meeting in response to another group asking the city to deprioritize enforcement of abortion laws. But the council has not taken any action on the issue, and

Mayor Dillon Meek said he does not think the city has a clear role to play.

During a meeting last month, speakers from Pro Choice Waco asked the council to consider passing a resolution similar to the Guarding the Right to Abortion Care for Everyone Act, or Grace Act, passed by Denton and Austin. The act would instruct local law enforcement to prioritize other crimes above investigating people seeking abortion or medical professionals who terminate pregnancies. Council Member Kelly Palmer

requested during the meeting last month that the council discuss the possibility during a future meeting. But the item was not on the agenda when a large crowd of anti-abortion speakers gathered to voice opposition to the Grace Act on Tuesday during the "hearing of visitors" portion of the city council meeting.

During an interview Thursday, Waco Mayor Dillon Meek said the exact scope of the city's power and functions is always up for debate, but he does not think the city council should weigh in on how abortion laws are enforced.

He said he is always open to hearing from residents during council meetings on issues the council is considering.

"I don't know if people will continue to use that forum or not, but I hope they do if it's in that realm of the business of the city and things that we can actually have an impact on," Meek said.

Meek said he looks for issues that have broad consensus among council members, data supporting the need to act, and the opportunity for substantial action the council can take to address the issues. He used the city's attempts

to create racially equitable economic policies and its COVID-19 response as examples of issues that are not traditionally the city's responsibility, but that city officials can still impact.

"The federal government has a role, the state has their own, city government has a role and there's overlap in different issues, certainly," Meek said. "But ultimately, sometimes there's only so much the city government can do for specific issues."

Before the council's 6 p.m.

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business session started Tuesday, Meek explained to the crowd that there was nothing related to the Grace Act or abortion on the night's agenda. Under the state Open Meetings Act, the council cannot legally discuss anything that was not included in the agenda or even respond to anyone speaking at the dais, he said.

"A resolution is not scheduled to be on a future agenda at the time, and I don't know if it will be on a future agenda, and that can always change," Meek said. "If it does, the entire community will have notice because it will be posted on a public agenda in advance of any discussion, vote or action."

He said kindness and civil discourse are part of Waco's culture and said he wanted the hearing to stay focused on the complex issue at hand, not personal attacks of city officials, staff or anyone else.

Once the hearing started, the tone remained civil and kind, Meek said.

He said the stack of cards, one for each person speaking, was the largest he had ever seen during a council meeting. The meeting lasted just under four hours, with about two hours of comments from visitors. The clear majority of the almost 50 people who spoke on the issue gave an anti-abortion message, though several gave a pro-abortion-rights message. Many more attended the meeting, and several also signed up to speak

but did not.

"We as a city and region must not turn a blind eye to those who would commit infant sacrifice on the altar of convenience or hopelessness or fear," said Carol Scott, executive pastor of Christ the King Church.

Erin Shank, an attorney and Texas House of Representatives candidate for District 56, said she has been studying Roe v. Wade since she was a law student in the 1980s. She said imprisoning people for seeking abortions or doctors for providing them is "barbaric" and "not American."

"(Attorney General Ken) Paxton's latest request ... is a full-throated request that prosecutors prosecute doctors, nurses and medical staff with punishments of life in prison or a \$100,000 fine and loss of medical license," Shank said.

She said the state's law strictly limiting abortions has a chilling effect on medical professionals trying to treat difficult pregnancies or other complications, and that she is grateful her doctor did not have to think about any of those legal consequences when she was going through her own difficult pregnancy years ago.

Also during the meeting, District 56 State Rep. Charles "Doc" Anderson said he is pro-life, called abortion "dismemberment" and said people should respect the legislative process and state laws.

Josh Tetens, local Republican candidate for district attorney, asked the city council to "never

consider the Grace Act.

"Here in our community we believe in the rule of law and the rule of law and order, and these laws protect the preborn," Tetens said.

In an interview Thursday, Tetens' Democratic opponent, Aubrey Robertson, said his biggest priority as DA would be lowering violent crime rates.

"We will look at the facts of every case, but I can't imagine designating a dollar amount to hunting down doctors and potential rape victims," Robertson said.

By 8:30 p.m. Tuesday, the council voted to extend the meeting to 9:30 p.m. As that time approached and Meek called for another vote to extend, Council Member Josh Borderud joked that the "night is still young" and motioned to continue to 11 p.m., which drew approving cheers from the crowd. The council voted to continue until 10:30 p.m. instead.

Assistant City Manager Ryan Holt said Tuesday was not the first time state and federal issues have brought larger groups of people to a Waco City Council meeting.

"I think most cities across the country, of any size, are prepared for those," Holt said.

He said the biggest safety concern was making sure the crowd did not exceed the Bosque Theater's maximum occupancy under the fire code. City workers solved that by directing the crowds to two overflow rooms outfitted with TVs showing the meeting room, which are always on standby on meeting nights.