

Governor proposes regent appointment

Payne says Allen's actions 'straw that broke camel's back'

By Brian Sharp
Senior Reporter

Sen. Ardyce Bohlke said Wednesday that past actions by NU regents hadn't prompted her to draft a bill granting Gov. Ben Nelson the power to appoint them.

Nelson said the proposal "was not related to any one incident."

But some regents are pointing the finger at one man — Regent Robert Allen.

Regent John Payne of Kearney said Allen's request of NU President Dennis Smith to fire University of Nebraska-Lincoln Chancellor Graham Spanier was "the straw that broke the camel's back."

The idea of appointed regents is nothing new. It came up as recently as last session, Bohlke said, but it's never had enough support.

Allen's boisterous criticism of Spanier has turned the tide, Payne said.

Bohlke, of Hastings, said the proposal would allow the governor to appoint all eight regents from across the state, along with an "at large" regent. Student regents would be unaffected.

If passed, the change wouldn't go into effect until 1998, Bohlke said, so current regents would serve their full terms.

Payne said that when Nelson called him before Christmas to tell him of the proposal, the governor said it was not a reflection on him "or most of the regents."

At a Wednesday press conference, Nelson said the change would provide more legislative and executive authority.

For the bill to become a constitutional amendment, Bohlke said it would have to pass the education committee, three votes of the Legislature and the Nebraska voters.

Regent Chairman Charles Wilson of Lincoln said Nelson would have the hardest time garnering support when it came to the voters.

Bohlke said only Nebraska, New York, Michigan, Nevada and Colorado elect university governing boards.

The board also is criticized for its 1989 firing of NU President Ronald Roskens, Wilson said. Regents never gave a reason, a mistake Wilson called "unacceptable."

Wilson also cited Allen as the focus in the upcoming debate. Actions by the controversial regent, both past and present, have soured some people's view of the board, Wilson said.

"Whenever there's a lot of criticism in the air, then people look at things and say, 'Gee, well maybe we should change that,'" Wilson said.

That assessment holds true for Sen. DiAnna Schimek of Lincoln.

Schimek said she had been opposed to taking away any voter's rights, but now she's wavering and could be persuaded.

"It just seems as if there's constant chaos (with the board)," she said, calling Allen's recent criticism of Spanier "unconscionable."

The man standing near the center of the issue, Allen, said Wednesday he would favor an appointed board. In fact, he said, Nelson could start tomorrow.

Allen said he was frustrated with a board that couldn't seem to focus on students and education.

With all that's happened, Payne said he was sure there would be more support for the proposal. Either way, Payne said it didn't make much difference to him what the decision was.



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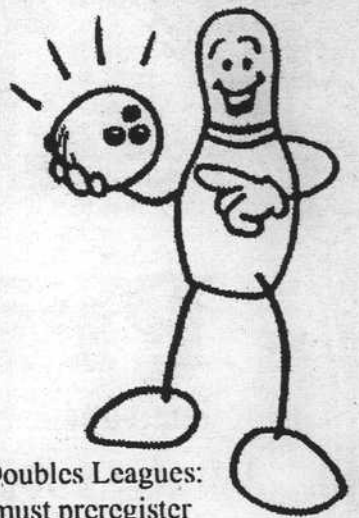
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