



Ramsey wants changes to see more conservative judges

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Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey wants to change how members to a powerful judicial panel are appointed in an effort to put more conservatives on the bench.

And Ramsey feels strongly enough about it that he may be willing to let the panel, called the Judicial Selection Commission, expire if he doesn't get his way.

"That's where I'd be," Ramsey (R-Blountville) said.

Under the state's system for appointing judges, the Judicial Selection Commission makes recommendations to the governor to choose among to fill an opening, such as on the Tennessee Supreme Court.

The issue revolves on how members of the Judicial Selection Commission are appointed. Currently, the speakers of the House and Senate appoint members, most of whom have to be recommended by an interest group, such as the trial lawyers or district attorney associations.

Ramsey thinks having to choose among nominees from the respective interest groups is "too restrictive."

"I feel like, as the speaker of the Senate, I ought to be able to appoint who I want to this, to the Judicial Selection Commission," Ramsey told reporters Thursday. "And I'm going to hold firm on this."

Currently, Ramsey and House Speaker Jimmy Naifeh (D-Covington) each get to make eight appointments to the Judicial Selection Commission. A 17th member to the panel is a joint appointment between the two speakers.

Naifeh is OK with how the commission is appointed, Ramsey said. Naifeh wasn't available for comment.

Traditionally, trial lawyers and criminal defense attorneys have been big campaign donors to Democratic candidates.

Both groups, the Tennessee Association for Justice, a group formerly known as the Tennessee Trial Lawyers Association, and the Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers get to have three members on the Judicial Selection Commission, one for each grand division of the state.

Ramsey acknowledged that the “goal” of the move was to “get more judges that may be more politically aligned with the conservatives.”

Gov. Phil Bredesen battled the Judicial Selection Commission in court last year, ultimately winning a lawsuit about the selection commission repeatedly nominating Houston Gordon, a Covington trial lawyer who once chaired the Tennessee Democratic Party and won the party’s nomination to challenge then Sen. Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.) in 1996.

Bredesen has also battled the commission on diversity, arguing the panel had not nominated enough minorities to choose among.

Lydia Lenker, Bredesen’s press secretary, said the governor was traveling Thursday and his opinion on Ramsey’s move wasn’t readily available.

The entire issue of the Judicial Selection Commission could become a stumbling block between the House and the Senate as the legislative session enters into what lawmakers hope is its final month.

The nominating panel expires this year without legislative action, and Ramsey indicated he may let the Judicial Selection Commission’s legal authority expire, effective July 1, if he doesn’t have luck changing the appointment process.

If that occurred, the panel would have a one-year wind down before going out of existence.

Rep. Kent Coleman (D-Murfreesboro), the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said the state’s method for selecting judges “has worked” and shouldn’t be changed.

“Any move to promote agenda-specific judges to the court I think is ill-advised,” Coleman said, adding that the current political makeup of the Tennessee Supreme Court is mixed between Republicans, Democrats and Independents.

Senate Republican Leader Mark Norris (R-Collierville) said conservative trial lawyers like him have not traditionally been involved in making picks for the selection commission.

“I know plenty of conservative trial lawyers, you’re talking to one here, but we’re just not the ones who have been at the helm so to speak,” Norris said.

Besides the trial lawyers and the criminal defense attorneys having three members each on the nominating commission, the Tennessee Bar Association gets two, the District Attorney General’s Conference has three, and the Tennessee Defense Lawyers Association can recommend one member.

Rounding out the 17-member Judicial Selection Commission, there are three non-lawyers, and one lawyer for the House speaker to appoint and another for the Senate speaker to appoint independently of any special interests.