



May 10, 2008

Republican proposal on judicial selection changes faces deadlock

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Associated Press

A Republican-led effort to overhaul the state's method of selecting appellate court candidates appears to be running out of steam just as two more judicial vacancies await being filled.

Senate Speaker Ron Ramsey, a Blountville Republican, is clashing with House Democrats and members of the legal community over his attempt to get more flexibility on who he can appoint to the 17-member Judicial Selection Commission. That panel is responsible for reviewing applicants and presenting the governor with three-person slates to choose from.

"I'm now to the point that what I laid on the table is what I'm going to stick with," Ramsey said. "So we may be at a deadlock for the year, but I'm not backing up anymore."

Friday was the deadline for applications for vacancies on the western sections of the Court of Appeals and the Court of Criminal Appeals. Another looming vacancy will follow the September retirement of Tennessee Chief Justice William M. Barker.

Gov. Phil Bredesen, a Democrat, got into an extended legal fight with the Judicial Selection Commission over what he considered a lack of qualified minority candidates presented to him following Supreme Court retirements in 2006.

Bredesen wants to require the panel to make all of its meetings public as a way to remove politics from the process — and has threatened to veto any changes that don't include the open meetings requirement.

If the Legislature approves no changes to the Judicial Selection Commission this year, the pressure will be on to reach some sort of agreement next year, when the Tennessee Plan for selecting judges is set to expire.

Ramsey said there's ample support among Republicans and the public for just directly electing judges.

"I understand why that may be a problem," he said. "But at the same time, that is an option."

Ramsey opposes the control that various legal groups — like prosecutors, criminal defense attorneys and trial lawyers — have over whom the speakers can appoint to the commission.