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Naifeh's wife lobbies on judicial issue

By *THEO EMERY*
Staff Writer

Last week, the Tennessee Bar Association sent a new representative to sit down with Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey and discuss the tangled issue of overhauling the state's judicial appointment system, which Ramsey had taken on as a legislative priority this session.

The lobbyist, Betty Anderson, was new to the discussions about judicial selection, but hardly a stranger to Capitol Hill. The wife of House Speaker Jimmy Naifeh, she's registered to represent more than 20 corporations and organizations that want their voices heard in the legislature.

The Tennessee Bar Association, which is a key part of the state's judicial selection process known as the Tennessee Plan, is not among clients for whom Anderson is a registered lobbyist.

Her role raises a flag to some because of her marriage to Naifeh, who would be pivotal to any changes to how Tennessee judges are appointed to the bench.

Anderson's appearance last week on behalf of the bar association came just as hopes of an overhaul for state's judicial selection system, known as the Tennessee Plan, ground to a halt. Most parties believe that revamping judicial selection is out of reach for this year.

Anderson, who is incoming chair of the bar association's legislative committee, said she has not broken any ethics laws because she was acting as a volunteer lobbyist, and lobbied on the issue less than the 10 days that would require her registration as bar association lobbyist.

She said that while she discussed judicial selection with both Ramsey and Naifeh, she treated the issue as she would with any of her other clients, and that there was no conflict of interest.

"I don't consider my work on this to be a conflict of interest. Do I think there could be a perception of that? I think you'd have to ask other people," she said. "I don't perceive one."

Dick Williams, chairman of the Tennessee chapter of the government watchdog group Common Cause, said that even if Anderson's lobbying was legal, her role raises an appearance of impropriety.

"I can't blame the public for saying it looks a little funny," Williams said. "I wouldn't use the term 'it doesn't pass the smell test,' but I wouldn't be surprised if some people would."

Naifeh said that he wasn't even aware that Anderson was lobbying on the judicial selection issue. He said he had only one brief conversation with her in passing, and that she had no influence on his opposition to Ramsey's proposals for changing the judicial selection process.

"I think she is free to represent anyone on a volunteer basis that she believes in," he said.

Allan Ramsaur, the bar association's executive director, said the association decided to enlist Anderson's talents because the discussions about judicial selection were accelerating, and that Anderson is just one of many volunteer lobbyists the association uses.

"As the pace of discussions picked up we drew in more and more volunteers to help with it," he said.

Ramsey said he was surprised by Anderson's appearance representing the bar association, as he had previously worked with the bar association's two paid lobbyists on his proposed changes to judicial selection.

A compromise had been worked out with the bar association, but appeared unlikely to progress even before Anderson appeared. Ramsey said that her presence had no impact on the issue.

"If anything, I was just surprised that she didn't know anything about the compromise that had been reached," he said. "I guess she was just here to give her opinion on it."

The lobbying over judicial selection is not the first time Anderson's role in a legislative issue has raised eyebrows. She also lobbied on behalf of AT&T amid an intense legislative battle over cable franchising, although she was barred from lobbying the legislature on the company's behalf.

The issue of judicial selection is expected to reach a sour conclusion on Tuesday, the last day of the legislative session.

Contact Theo Emery at 726-4889 or temery@tennessean.com.
