



Wilder's last gasp on state judges falls short

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A last attempt by Sen. John Wilder to save the Judicial Selection Committee failed Tuesday. *Matthew Williams/The City Paper*

Focusing on his legacy before looming retirement, former Lt. Gov. John Wilder made one final effort Tuesday to ensure the future existence of how the state picks its judges, but Senate Republicans denied the move.

Sen. Wilder (D-Mason) was attempting to resurrect a bill to extend the life of the Judicial Selection Commission, which is a key cog in the so-called Tennessee Plan and one of the signature achievements of Wilder's 44-year legislative career.

The Tennessee Plan is how the state picks its appellate and trial court judges. The selection commission recommends potential judges to the governor to choose among. After that, the judges are re-elected or not through retention votes.

The Judicial Selection Commission is slated to go into a one-year wind down starting July 1 and expire in 2009 if lawmakers don't extend it.

Current Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey (R-Blountville) has been holding up the renewal of the Judicial Selection Commission as his attempt to make reforms to how the panel is selected hasn't gained traction. Ramsey wants more latitude on whom he can appoint to the powerful commission with the ultimate goal of having more conservative judges.

The bill extending the life of the panel was stuck in a Senate committee, and Wilder tried to bring the legislation directly to the Senate floor Tuesday evening.

"This entity needs to stay alive," Wilder said.

But the Senate defeated Wilder's move to call the bill directly to the Senate floor on an 18-15 vote. All 16 Republicans voted against him as well as Sens. Rosalind Kurita (D-Clarksville) and Mike Williams (I-Maynardville).

After his move was defeated, Wilder told Republican senators, who had just voted against his move, that he had "failed."

"I failed you Randy (McNally), Rusty (Crowe), Tim (Burchett). I mean I failed you. You know I failed you," Wilder said. "Partisan politics — that's not my way. Rusty you know. All of ya'll know that. It's not my way. And it's not the right thing for the state. Sen. (Jamie) Woodson you know it. You know what I know. All of you know what I know. It's not right. But God bless you."

Wilder, 86, is retiring from the Senate this year. He served as Senate speaker and lieutenant governor for 36 of those years, many of those years appointing Republicans to chair committees despite him being a Democrat.

"I thought it was disrespectful," said Senate Democratic Leader Jim Kyle of the vote.

McNally (R-Oak Ridge) made the motion that defeated Wilder's move, arguing it circumvented the Senate's committee system.