



Ethics help wanted

Panel begins search to replace 10 Ethics Board members who resigned

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NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A panel of private college presidents charged with nominating replacements for 10 recently resigned members of the state Ethics Board will meet in August and expects to have a list of 30 candidates ready to submit to Gov. Bobby Jindal and the Legislature, the group's chairman says.

"We're supposed to have three names for each slot, so we've got a full plate," the Rev. Kevin Wildes, president of Loyola University and chairman of the nominating committee, said in a Thursday interview.

Most of the ethics board members stepped down in late June amid complaints that changes pushed by Jindal will reduce their role enforcing ethics laws. That puts many ethics cases in limbo until the board is reconstituted and selects a replacement for its top lawyer and administrator, who also resigned in June.

The process will likely take months. The law gives the nominating committee 60 days to come up with its list of nominees when a vacancy occurs. Then the governor and lawmakers have 60 days to make their appointments: seven by the governor, two by the House and one by the Senate. The Senate gets only one because the lone remaining board member, Cedric Lowrey, of Alexandria, is a Senate appointee.

Complicating the task are matters of political geography — Jindal's appointees must come from each of the state's seven congressional districts — and the fact that board members will have to reveal extensive details about their personal finances. Also, restrictions on contracts with the state could bar many candidates, for instance lawyers with an ownership interest in a firm that does business with the state.

Wildes was confident the panel will find enough nominees. "I think a lot is going to depend on where they are in their life," he said, adding that retirees who no longer have to worry about disclosing personal business contacts and no longer have ties to state contracts would likely be good candidates.

Several people have called panel members to express interest in the position, Wildes said. Mary Ann Coleman, president of the Louisiana Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, said her office has also received about 15 queries.

Most of the board resignations came en masse following what appeared to have been an otherwise routine board meeting June 26.

All the board members had expressed displeasure with the board's reduced role in ethics enforcement under laws Jindal pushed through the Legislature during a February special session. The board remains

an investigatory body, but determining whether an ethics violation has actually occurred would fall to administrative law judges selected by an appointee of the governor.

Jindal's administration has defended the new role as an appropriate division of duties. Critics, including two nonpartisan watchdog groups, have questioned that. The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana said the new setup, together with a higher standard of evidence adopted in the same bill, could weaken ethics enforcement. Ten Ethics Board members asked that Jindal veto the law in March, to no avail.

Board members' mass resignations happened days before they would have fallen under the tough new financial disclosure laws. Jindal has suggested that was the reason for their exodus. However, former board vice chairman John W. Greene said only one member had problems with the new disclosure law. Most quit because the board's authority to rule on many outstanding cases had been removed, Greene said.

Presidents of Loyola, Centenary College, Dillard University, Louisiana College, Our Lady of Holy Cross College at New Orleans, Our Lady of the Lake College at Baton Rouge, Xavier University and Tulane University are the members of the nominating committee.