

University-Trustee Battles Sap Energy from Important Efforts

Written by Rich Miller
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A recent meeting between Metro East legislators and Governor Pat Quinn's staff turned heated at times, and as a result nothing was accomplished in the standoff over Quinn's appointments to the Southern Illinois University Board of Trustees.

The governor's three appointments to SIU's board were unanimously rejected by the Senate in late February – the first time anybody I've talked to can remember anything like that happening. But the governor has doubled down instead of compromising.

Quinn replaced three members with close ties to the university's Edwardsville campus, which is near St. Louis. For years, governors followed a "gentleman's agreement" that gave the Edwardsville campus three of the governor's seven nominated members. That agreement has coincided with explosive growth at the formerly backwater campus, so locals are loath to go back to the old days of being treated as the redheaded stepchild of the Carbondale campus. Just one of Quinn's new appointments had connections to Metro East, a complete unknown who applied for the trustee post on the Internet.

The Metro East legislators want Quinn to back off his choices, and they want to make sure that Roger Herrin is not reinstated as chair. Quinn engineered Herrin's election as chair a couple years back, but he was later ousted in a coup orchestrated by SIU President Glenn Poshard and replaced with famed Metro East trial lawyer John Simmons. Simmons was, in turn, ousted by Quinn last month. The area's legislators want to make Edwardsville School Superintendent Ed Hightower the new board chair. Hightower, an African-American, was also ousted by Quinn, a move that has been sharply attacked by the local NAACP and area black ministers.

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But the governor is flatly refusing to back down, which led to some heated moments in that recent meeting, with at least two Democratic legislators raising their voices and denouncing the governor's tactics. And Quinn told reporters last week that he appointed "three good people, excellent people" and believes the Senate "needs to take another look at these excellent appointees."

"I don't think they treated the taxpayers of Illinois and the people who believe in education very well," Quinn said of the Senate's action. "The governor appoints people, and I appointed three people who I thought were good, so I'll keep working on that."

The Illinois Constitution prohibits Quinn from reappointing the three rejected trustees. A resolution from the Senate "requesting" that Quinn renominate the three would be required before they could move forward. That appears unlikely at best.

The SIU controversy has spawned payback legislation and spread to other universities as well. Senator Bill Haine (D-Alton) has introduced legislation requiring that at least three members of the university's board be from Metro East, with another three from the Carbondale area and the seventh from Sangamon County. SIU has a medical school in Springfield. The bill appears to be picking up major steam.

University of Illinois boosters have grumbled for the past few years that Quinn has gone way outside the university's environs for his trustee picks, so Senator Michael Frerichs (D-Urbana) moved legislation out of committee last week that would allow the school's alumni association to pick five of the U of I's nine trustees. Republican state Senator Chapin Rose is also supporting the bill, as is the quite powerful alumni association.

And senators are awaiting word on what Quinn plans to do about the growing controversy at Chicago State University. Some Quinn-appointed trustees have pushed to oust CSU President Wayne Watson, and some of those are up for reappointment. They are surely facing a tough confirmation fight as well. Watson has irked many at the university with an aggressive management style that, while showing some quite significant results for the school, has ruffled several powerful local feathers. But he has backing in the Senate, so another fight is almost guaranteed unless Quinn heeds the warning signs.

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Yes, the governor “appoints people,” as Quinn says. But he does so in these cases only with the advice and consent of the Senate. You’d think in an era when Quinn needs as much help as possible solving the pension-funding crisis and the state’s busted budget that he’d try to avoid openly antagonizing legislators and wasting valuable energy and time over stupid stuff such as this. Instead, he’s angering and alienating the very people he needs to get the job done.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.