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Hot News

Rel Can Put Her Own Stamp on DPUC

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(Source: New Haven Register)By Luther Turmelle, New Haven Register, Conn.

Dec. 15--With two vacancies on the state Department of Public Utility Control, and the likelihood of a third by the middle of next year, Gov. M. Jodi Rel has an opportunity to remake the regulatory agency in a way that she might find more to her liking.

While DPUC Spokeswoman Beryl Lyons insists that there is no evidence Rel is unhappy with the performance of the agency, a comment recently made by one of her spokesmen hardly seemed like a vote of confidence.

"The governor views these upcoming selections as an opportunity to improve the agency and make it a national model," spokesman Adam Liegeot said Friday. "Connecticut faces many challenges with respect to providing reliable and affordable energy, and Gov. Rel wants to fill the DPUC vacancies with innovative problem-solvers."

While Rel may consider who she appoints to the positions important, one of the commissioner vacancies - created when James Fleming stepped down to take a job in the private sector -- has remained unfilled since March of this year. The other vacancy was created when Anne George, who had served as a DPUC commissioner for five years, left the agency to take a job as vice president of external affairs and communications for ISO-New England -- the regional electric grid operator -- in November.

Then, earlier this month, DPUC Chairman Donald Downes announced that he would probably leave the agency when his current term expires at the end of June.

Lyons said Downes, who has served 12 years on the DPUC, still hasn't submitted anything in writing to Rel about his retirement.

"Let's just say I'll believe it when I see it," Lyons said.

Of course, with Downes' term expiring, Rel could choose not to reappoint him to the regulatory agency. But jettisoning Downes would mean getting rid of someone in her own political party.

Liegeot said Rel "intends to name proven leaders with top-notch organizational and managerial skills to these important posts."

Of the three current commissioners, two -- John Betkoski and Anthony Palermino -- are former state lawmakers, while Downes has an extensive background in public service administration. Palermino and Downes are both lawyers.

But according to one national utility industry expert familiar with Connecticut, Rel ought to consider appointments from a wider variety of backgrounds.

"Look for someone with real business experience, someone who is a real-life problem-solver," said Robert McCullough, managing partner of Portland, Ore.-based McCullough Research, an energy consulting firm. "The best state regulator is someone with a healthy dose of common sense, someone who is straight forward. That common sense is something you need; what you do not need is a career bureaucrat."

Lyons said most of the people who have served as commissioners during her time at the agency "did not have utility backgrounds when they came in."

"They learn, and after a while, they develop an interest in one industry or another that we regulate," Lyons said. For example, she said Downes focuses on electric utilities while Betkoski specializes in dealing with the water companies the DPUC regulates.

"But they have to be open-minded and be willing to learn about regulatory law," Lyons said.

In order to do that, the commissioners take part in training offered by the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, Lyons said. The Washington, D.C., non-profit organization, which represents state regulatory officials from around the country, not only offers programs in regulatory law, but in a variety of other areas such as changing trends in the energy, telecommunications and water industries, she said.

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