Resources Board nominee rejected

Full Senate will consider “Bill” Murphy after ex-Conservation Congress leader gets thumbs down.

By Ron Seely
Environment reporter

A Senate committee Wednesday rejected Gov. Tommy Thompson's latest appointment to the state Natural Resources Board.

The appointment of Francis "Bill" Murphy, a Portage lawyer and former longtime head of the Conservation Congress, was rejected 3-1 by the Committee on Agriculture, Environmental Resources and Campaign Finance Reform.

The vote follows a contentious hearing last month during which Murphy was grilled by committee members, including Chairwoman Alice Clausing, D-Menomonie. Clausing criticized Murphy for jokes she called racist and sexist that he told at a 1993 meeting of the Conservation Congress, a citizen group that advises the DNR on conservation issues.

Clausing also said she had information from several sources — which she refused to name because of confidentiality agreements — that showed Murphy was appointed by Thompson in exchange for quashing opposition within the Conservation Congress to making the DNR secretary a political appointee.

"Appointments should not be based on payback," Clausing said after Wednesday's vote.

A spokesman for Gov. Thompson said after the first hearing that Clausing's charges were "unfounded and ridiculous" and accused her of turning the appointment into a political issue.

In further explaining the vote Wednesday, Clausing said she is concerned that Murphy's behavior could damage the reputation and the work of the Natural Resources Board.

"I'm afraid it would have a terrible impact on that board's image and on the ability of that board to function properly," Clausing said.

Murphy was unavailable for comment Wednesday.

Dale Schultz, R-Richland Center, was the only committee member Wednesday to vote in favor of Murphy's appointment.

Schultz said Murphy's nearly 40 years of service with the Conservation Congress far overshadows any untoward behavior Murphy may be accused of.

"I urged (the committee) to look beyond the problems it had with Mr. Murphy to the greater service," Schultz said.

Schultz said he has known Murphy for nearly 30 years, and he said Murphy is a colorful character. But Schultz said Murphy's personality has little to do with his ability to serve on the board and make decisions regarding natural resource issues.

"Is this alleged behavior relevant to the job you're asking them to do?" Schultz asked.

The committee's action on the appointment will be forwarded to the entire Senate for action, Clausing said. She said a floor debate and vote could come as early as next week.

The reappointment of three other Natural Resources Board members was approved by the committee Wednesday. They are Trygve A. Solberg, Minocqua; James E. Tiefenthaler Jr., Waukesha; and Stephen D. Willett, Phillips.