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Ohio Governor Mike DeWine (Associated Press)

DeWine reappoints Kasich's pick for PUCO

Gov. Mike DeWine announced Thursday he has reappointed a commissioner to the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio who was put there by his predecessor, former Gov. John Kasich, in 2017.

Daniel Conway, a lawyer in the energy and telecommunications field for more than 35 years and an adjunct professor at Ohio State University's Law School, can now remain on the state regulatory board through April 10, 2027. His new term starts April 11.

Two Democrats hoping to win their party's May 3 primary and run against Mr. DeWine in the Nov. 8 general election objected to Mr. Conway's reappointment.

Democrat John Cranley singled Mr. Conway out in a news release issued early Thursday, claiming that Mr. Conway has a conflict because he holds investments in Nuveen, one of two firms authorized to own shares of Energy Harbor Corp., the company which now owns and operates the Davis-Besse and Perry nuclear plants that were at the center of scandal-ridden House Bill 6.

"He has no business being on the PUCO and certainly does not deserve another term," Mr. Cranley said before the announcement.

Afterward, he said Mr. DeWine's decision to re-appoint Mr. Conway "shows why we need a new governor who will fire Conway and other utility regulators who have conflicts and replace them with ones who do not."

Likewise, Nan Whaley expressed disappointment after the announcement, stating that Mr. Conway has "represented several large utilities regulated by the PUCO."

"Governor DeWine just had an opportunity to show us that he wasn't beholden to the utility industry and he failed — again," she said. "At every turn, DeWine continues to prove that he is focused on big corporations and special interests, not everyday Ohioans who are still footing the bill for the HB 6 bribery scandal."

Mr. DeWine made no mention of Energy Harbor or the company at the center of scandal accusations, FirstEnergy Corp., in his announcement.

Instead, he praised Mr. Conway for having "a track record of being judicious and weighing issues from all sides."

"I appreciate Commissioner Conway's continued service on the PUCO," he said.

The governor's communications director, Dan Tierney, echoed those words in a follow-up phone call with The Blade, stating that Mr. Conway has demonstrated to the governor he is an independent thinker.

The appointment is subject to Ohio Senate confirmation.

Mr. Conway was chosen from among four finalists provided to Mr. DeWine in the second batch of potential nominees.

Two of those remaining three finalists — former Walbridge Mayor Dan Wilczynski and Upper Peninsula Power Co. executive Stephen Serraino, of Holland — have Toledo-area ties.

The other finalist was David Yarnell, a gas distribution and utilities manager at SAM, LLC.

Mr. DeWine was asked to choose one.

But on Feb. 3, the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel, as well as Legal Aid Society of Southwest Ohio, LLC and Pro Seniors, Inc., asked for the governor to reopen the nominating council's application process again.

“The failure of the commissioner selection process culminated recently in a shocking scandal involving FirstEnergy and the preceding PUCO chair,” a recent OCC letter states.

That was a reference to what federal prosecutors have called a \$61 million bribery scheme masterminded by former Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder and involving possible malfeasance by others.

Former PUCO Chairman Sam Randazzo, a lobbyist appointed to that position by Mr. DeWine, resigned in late 2020 after it was revealed FirstEnergy had paid him \$4.3 million to sever what was initially described as a consulting contract.

In a new letter signed Wednesday by Ohio Consumers' Counsel Bruce Weston and Ohio Poverty Law Center Director Susan Jagers, Mr. DeWine was urged to have the nominating council keep looking because each of the four latest nominees also has worked for the utility industry.

“None of the nominees are consumer advocates,” the OCC states. “The state Nominating Council process is failing the people of Ohio.”

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