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Politics blocks federal judgeship for Nashvillian

Puryear nomination falls to next president

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WASHINGTON — Nominations of two Tennesseans — Gus Puryear of Nashville to be a federal judge and Susan Williams of Knoxville to be a TVA board member — have been derailed by political squabbles.

Several prison rights and civil rights groups have objected to the nomination of Puryear, general counsel for Corrections Corporation of America, the private prison giant based in Nashville. CCA had been hammered by allegations of underplaying serious incidents in its jails and misrepresenting the circumstances of in-custody deaths.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, the third-ranking Republican in the Senate, said Tuesday that neither nomination would be approved before the end of the year. That means the nomination process for both slots will begin again after a new president takes office in January.

"That's another example of the Democratic Congress not approving a qualified nominee," Alexander said of Puryear's choice by President Bush to be a judge in the Middle District of Tennessee.

Democrats opposed both

Puryear was caught in an election-year political fight. Republicans have tried to gain approval for as many of Bush's nominees as possible before the end of his term.

Reasons cited by opponents as to why Puryear should not be confirmed include: a lack of trial and judicial experience, his role as chief lawyer for the country's largest private prison company, and the company's handling of the 2004 death of Estelle Richardson while she was in the Metro Detention Facility in Nashville.

Democrats, who control the Senate, say they have treated the president's nominees as well as Republicans did near the end of Bill Clinton's presidency.

But they have slowed the process, hoping they will be able to fill the vacancies if their nominee, Sen. Barack Obama, wins the presidency.

Williams' nomination to the TVA board was a casualty of a battle between Alexander and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.

Reid held up her nomination and that of Bishop William Graves of Memphis because he wants a Democratic representative on the TVA board.

In June, Reid let Graves' nomination go through after Alexander and Sen. Bob Corker blocked a nomination Reid wanted.

In response to Alexander's comments, Puryear released a written statement through CCA.

"I was honored to be nominated and understand fully how election-year politics works in Washington. I am very happy in my current job and look forward to continuing to work with my friends in Nashville to make our city and state a better place."

Alex Friedmann, vice president of Private Corrections Institute, coordinated much of the opposition to the Puryear nomination, which Bush made in June 2007.

"Mr. Puryear was an unqualified, inexperienced, conflicted and controversial nominee for a lifetime appointment to the federal bench. The citizens of Middle Tennessee deserve better and hopefully will receive a more qualified candidate during the next administration," Friedmann said in a statement.