

Wednesday, January 19, 2021

House Education Committee HB 1220
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REP. OWENS AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

My name is Jack McDonald. I'm appearing on behalf of the North Dakota Newspaper Association and the North Dakota Broadcasters Association. We oppose the portion of this bill that allows the State Board of Higher Education to hire or fire a commissioner in a closed meeting.

This change has been proposed several times over the last half-century and has always been defeated because you – as legislators and representatives of your constituents – have always believed that changes in this extremely important position should be as transparent and open to the public as possible.

The commissioner guides one of the largest – and most expensive – ships of state. The board plays a key role in guiding the state's colleges and universities that are such a major factor in the economies not only of the cities where they are located but also of the entire state.

This section of the law that provides for closed meetings regarding the hiring of the presidents was enacted in 1971. The commissioner – although the position I believe was executive director at the time – was not included.

Since that time the board has hired many commissioners and there has never been a shortage of applicants. The current commissioner is certainly an asset to the board and has done a fine job.

So why make a change now? Has there been some problems? Has there been an outcry from North Dakotans for this change? No. So why make this change and put still more information behind closed doors and hidden from North Dakota citizens.

The fine-tuning of the notices and status of the board's committees is a welcome addition.

We respectfully suggest the following amendment:

On page 1, line 24, delete: "the commissioner of higher education, or"

And renumber accordingly.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'd be happy to answer any questions.