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**Tommy Thompson praised as choice to lead UW System**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Lawmakers, regents, chancellors, staff and faculty all largely praised former Gov. Tommy Thompson’s appointment to serve as interim UW System President.

University insiders say the unanimous Board of Regents pick of June 19 means there will be a passionate advocate for the system through tumultuous budget constraints brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It’s a pretty bold move,” said Jon Shelton, UW-Green Bay faculty representative and American Federation of Teachers-Wisconsin vice president. “The system could’ve tried to go with somebody internal, but I think this indicates they’re looking to bring in some firepower to advocate for the system right now.”

The system estimates a more than $100 million budget shortfall through the summer, even after accounting for cost-savings measures and federal aid.

Thompson, a Republican, is the only governor elected to four terms in Wisconsin history, serving from 1987 to 2001, when he was tapped to lead the Department of Health and Human Services under the Bush administration. He was a champion of the UW System during his time in the East Wing. And since leaving public life, he from time to time had been raised as a possible candidate to lead the UW System.

Thompson requested the minimum salary for a president of $489,334, according to the university.

The former governor in a tweet called the system “the state’s most valuable asset,” and promised to be its biggest advocate and evaluator through his tenure.

Assembly Colleges and Universities Committee Chair Dave Murphy, R-Greenville, told WisPolitics.com he had heard rumors Thompson was being considered for the position. He added he felt the pick could bring about some bipartisan unity.

“He’s coming in to serve the people of Wisconsin at a time when he’s needed,” Murphy said. “And that’s always been Tommy Thompson. He stepped up when the state needed him.”

U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Town of Vermont, in a tweet said he looks forward to working with Thompson on university issues, adding over 80 percent of its federal funding goes through House Appropriations subcommittees that he sits on.

Legislative leadership were also quick to hail the announcement, with Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, calling Thompson “an innovator, collaborator and one of Wisconsin’s finest leaders.”

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, said there was “nobody better” to lead the system through unprecedented times.

University of Alaska System President Jim Johnsen recently pulled out of the search to replace outgoing System President Ray Cross. That process drew criticism because no faculty or staff served on the search committee and Johnsen was the only candidate presented for consideration.

In his announcement, Johnsen hinted at the furor that erupted over the process, saying “it’s clear they have important process issues to work out.”

Regent President Andrew Petersen told reporters that regents learned “transparency is key” after going through the failed search process.

“Good leaders learn from mistakes, and going forward I think there will be discussions between members of the Board of Regents on the importance of having a committee that’s expansive,” He said in a video conference. “And I think we’re open to that. And we’re going to have time to work on that.”

Thompson’s appointment is effective July 1, but according to the system, Cross will stay on another 90 days as a consultant to help with the transition.

Evers’ regent appointees take control of the board next May. Some system followers pointed out that could mean any full president hired in the meantime by a board still led by Walker appointees might not have had a job in the near future anyway.

A new search won’t start for at least a year, and Thompson will serve until a permanent appointment is named.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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