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Clean contracting off to slow start, as Rell lags on appointments

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HARTFORD — The new state panel charged with overseeing state contracting and making the difficult balancing test of determining whether to privatize state services is off to a slow start.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell, who repeatedly has touted restoring public trust — including through the use of “clean contracting” standards — as one of her top priorities, still hasn’t made all of her appointments to the board, a task she was free to begin last January.

The governor also still hasn’t named an executive director to lead the State Contracting Standards Board, though her media office said Monday this process has been delayed because of the state’s fiscal woes.

And while legislative leaders have made all six of their appointments to the 14-member board, the last slot wasn’t filled until Monday, when Senate Majority Leader Martin M. Looney, D-New Haven, filed his selection.

“It’s disappointing in the economic climate that we face that the governor and her administration haven’t made this a higher priority,” said Matt O’Connor, spokesman for the Connecticut State Employees Association and for the State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition. The latter group represents close to 50,000 unionized state employees.

“It’s been enormously important to our members for years,” he said, adding that in tough fiscal times, “This board is needed to go to work now more than ever.”

Rell, a Republican, and the Democrat-controlled legislature fought for three years — and through three vetoes — before settling in late 2007 on the so-called “clean contracting” statute.

The measure was proposed in response to the bid-rigging scandals that drove former Gov. John G. Rowland from office in 2004.

“This bill serves as a capstone to my ethics reform effort and it will continue to foster public confidence in the way Connecticut conducts its business,” Rell said when she signed the legislation in October 2007.

The law creates a 14-member State Contracting Standards Board that must audit agencies that issue contracts. These reviews must be conducted at least once every three years.

The measure also stipulates that an agency looking to privatize a government service prepare a cost-benefit analysis for the standards board, in some instances. If the privatization would cost the state more than \$150 million, a contract could be awarded to a private company only if the General Assembly approved it.

The board itself was created by statute in January 2009. Rell was given eight appointments and authority to select an executive director from among those eight. Over the past year she has named six people to the panel, and still hasn’t named a director.

The board must have eight members for a quorum to exist and a meeting to be held. No meetings have been held to date.

But starting Jan. 1 of this year, the panel is supposed to be up and running, and must prepare cost-benefit analyses before major privatization of state services can occur.

State government relies heavily on private nonprofits to provide the bulk of its social services — at about half the cost of those provided by state agencies — to the mentally ill, mentally retarded, abused children, inmates, drug addicts, and others, spending more than \$1.3 billion last fiscal year.

It also relies on the private sector to run other programs as well.

House Majority Leader Denise W. Merrill, D-Mansfield, said with the Rell administration repeatedly charging that lawmakers aren't doing enough to cut spending, there's no reason for the contracting board not to be operational now.

"Here's the governor's chance to really analyze whether there are some efficiencies to be made," Merrill said. "She needs to take advantage of it."

Rell's media office issued a statement Monday saying, "The governor wants to fill this board with a mix of highly skilled, independent-minded candidates who are passionate about improving state government contracting. Governor Rell continues to interview candidates for these remaining posts."

The statement added that the hiring of an executive director "has been held up for budgetary reasons. The state does not have the funds to pay for new programs, new services, or new hires. The governor's deficit-mitigation plan assumes no hires for this fiscal year."

State Comptroller Nancy Wyman reported this week that this fiscal year's \$18.64 billion budget is running \$513 million in deficit.

Rell chastised lawmakers for rejecting her plan to reduce it by about \$300 million, largely through spending cuts.

The governor vetoed a Democratic plan to reduce the deficit by \$120 million. About two-thirds of that plan involved boosting revenue by canceling a Jan. 1 reduction in the tax on wealthy estates.

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