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Taft, Davidson, Kurfess Join Constitutional Revision Panel

The panel charged with recommending updates to Ohio's constitution finalized its membership roster Thursday, adding former Gov. Bob Taft and two former speakers to the list.

Legislators sitting on the Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission unanimously approved the addition of 20 new public members during the panel's first hearing since February. The 12 [legislative members](#) were appointed previously.

[Speaker Bill Batchelder](#) (R-Medina) and [Rep. Vernon Sykes](#) (D-Akron), who co-chair the commission, expressed satisfaction with the quality of applicants to sit on the commission. The speaker said more than 250 applications were received.

In addition to Gov. Taft, the new members include: former Speaker Jo Ann Davidson; former Speaker Charles Kurfess; Franklin County Commissioner Paula Brooks; 10th District Court of Appeals Judge Judith French; Ohio State University political science professor Herb Asher; lobbyist Fred Mills; and Joseph Rugola, executive director of the Ohio Association of Public School Employees. ([Membership List](#))

The speaker told reporters after the hearing that each caucus reviewed the other's nominations and worked together to narrow the list to the 20 finalists.

There was no prior agreement to have a certain number of Republican and Democratic appointees, he said.

"I did not want to have a partisan situation, so I was communicating regularly with Vern and he was visiting regularly with his people," he said. "I frankly have no idea whether there are more Ds or Rs or what."

The panel also agreed to retain the list of other applicants as a pool of potential future appointees since the commission is able to continue making recommendations until July 1, 2021.

All of the commission's proposed constitutional changes must be approved by two-thirds of the commission members and then three-fifths of the General Assembly before being placed on the ballot.

Members heard suggestions on how the commission should proceed with its work from Steven Steinglass, dean emeritus of the Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, who offered his ongoing assistance.

Mr. Steinglass said the previous constitutional commission that met during the 1970s had an "80% batting average" in convincing Ohio voters to ratify 16 out of the 20 amendments it proposed.

In the 100 years since the 1912 constitutional convention, 102 out of 150 amendments the General Assembly placed on the ballot were approved, he said in response to a question from [Rep. Matt Huffman](#) (R-Lima). That compares favorably to only 18 out of 67 voter initiated amendments that were ratified, he added.

Speaker Batchelder said he anticipated the commission issuing its first recommendations sometime next spring.

"This is not an atypical startup," he said, comparing the commission's slow pace to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, when several members arrived in Philadelphia months late. "These things - it's sort of like a train in the old days starting up with a steam engine."

Ballot Board: The speaker said he would honor [Rep. Dennis Murray](#)'s (D-Sandusky) request to review the Ballot Board process for summarizing issues for the ballot. The Ohio Supreme Court recently ordered the board to revise its language describing an amendment to overhaul the redistricting process. (See *separate story*)

In his letter to the speaker, Rep. Murray said partisan politics had infected the Ballot Board's deliberations on Issue 2 and a separate decision to eliminate a referendum on a Republican-passed elections law ([HB 194](#)).

"These two actions indicate to me that the Ballot Board has drifted from its original, limited authority set forth in the Ohio Constitution and instead has stretched its authority to exert partisan influence over the process," he said. "If the referendum can be so easily thwarted by renumbering and reenacting citizen-blocked provisions in subsequent bills or by misleading voters as to what they are voting on, then it is rendered much less effective as a citizen check on the legislature."

Mr. Batchelder said he strongly disagreed with the court's order for the Ballot Board to revise its language, suggesting it breached the constitutional separation of powers.

He noted the legislature has traditionally respected the court's authority by enacting its budget request without changes.

"The budget that is submitted by the court is not altered," he said. "We have to be very sensitive to them. By the same token, the Ballot Board and all these other entities that are running around out there have to be given certain deference and I think that was not the case in this opinion, except for the justice from Toledo."

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