

Panel approves Barnes for parole board chief

Assemblyman's promise: No favors

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TRENTON — The state Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday unanimously approved Gov. Corzine's nomination of Assemblyman Peter J. Barnes, D-Middlesex, to become chairman of the State Parole Board.

Barnes' hearing before the committee was relatively painless, as most of the lawmakers sung the praises of the former FBI agent and former director of public safety in Edison and New Brunswick. He will resign from the Assembly if affirmed for the post.

"He brings experience, sophistication, the ability to organize and to make sure things run properly," said Sen. Nia H. Gill, D-Essex.

Committee Chairman Sen. John H. Adler, D-Camden, did pose the single question to Barnes: What would he do if the governor's office called and asked him to grant parole for someone as a political favor?

Barnes, 78, a member of the Legislature since 1995, said he would tell the caller it was an "improper phone call" and would report the call to the attorney general.

"In my 11 years down here, nobody has put their arm around my shoulder and say 'I got a deal for you' because they know my background. . . . I would not offer up my reputation to do somebody a favor," Barnes said.

The hypothetical question posed by Adler stems from the 2004 release of alleged high-ranking mobster Angelo Prisco, when someone in the office of then-Gov. James E. McGreevey pressured the Parole Board to reverse an earlier decision and release Prisco early.

Final vote on Barnes' nomination is expected Thursday by the full Senate.

The Senate Judiciary Committee also advanced the nomination of Edithe Fulton of Toms River to become a member of the state Board of Education, after an hourlong hearing and some controversy.

Some of the committee members were concerned Fulton, who served as president of the New Jersey Education Association for eight years until 2005, would have a conflict of interest after heading the state's teachers union.

Sen. Gerald Cardinale, R-Bergen, said while Fulton served NJEA members well, she might be partial toward granting tenure to certain teachers if their hearings come before the state board. Cardinale also said Fulton's past opposition to school vouchers gave him pause because of her "inflexible" attitude toward a subject that might come before the board.

Not all was bad for Fulton, as many members also gave their support and said her background as a teacher would aide her as a member of the board. Fulton eventually was approved 7-1, with two senators voting to abstain.

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