Week in Review, March 5, 2021

We are still following the environmental crisis at AltEn. This situation should have been dealt with years ago. The state is finally filing a lawsuit.

In addition, we are opposing two proposed candidates for the board of the Nebraska Environmental Trust. The two we oppose are Christen and Hellbusch. (see the attached op-ed).

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**LOCAL VIEW**

Board choices deserve scrutiny

Little attention is usually paid to a governor’s appointment of nominees to the state’s many boards and commissions, and the Legislature regularly confirms those nominees. But it shouldn’t this time.

On Feb. 26, the Natural Resources Committee sent to the floor of the Legislature four nominees for the 14-member board of the Nebraska Environmental Trust: three of whom were reappointments. What was different this time was that three committee members voted “no” on two of those nominees, and two voted “no” on another one.

What’s going on here? It seems that environmental activists are finally paying attention to the body that has awarded nearly one-half billion dollars of lottery money since 1992 to more than 2,000 projects that are supposed to “conserve, enhance and restore the natural environments of the state.” But lately, something has gone wrong.

The trust’s board is defending itself against a lawsuit that alleges it granted $3 million to a large ethanol producer for fuel pumps and storage tanks that the company could afford itself, and that the award was never approved by a majority of the board. In addition, it is alleged the board has repeatedly violated the state’s open meetings law and disregarded many other of its own rules and regulations. A court date is set for March 25.

Nebraskans are noticing. At trust-sponsored roundtable last fall, many of the 134 attendees expressed concern about the grant process. “There is a current perception that recent grants were awarded that did not reflect the mission of the NET,” a report of the meeting said. “Increased transparency regarding the grant review and decision process could help increase public understanding of decisions.”

These are not the only complaints registered. Some members of the board have publicly condemned the use of conservation easements, which are key to many project applications, even saying they will not approve a grant that contains one despite its other assets.

It is also alarming that more and more state agencies are being awarded grants that substitute for dollars that could come from their legislatively appropriated budgets. Five of the board members are directors of state agencies who benefit from these grants.

If the three contested reappointments are approved, along with a new nomination, it will mean that there will be no representatives on the trust board from the western two-thirds of the state and no women. Hardy a diverse group that prides itself in having in the past approved at least one project in all 93 counties.

What’s to be done? The Legislature should either vote down those board nominees or hold up their consideration until a more thorough examination is done of trust operations. It seems adequate rules, rules and regulations are in place. But it looks like some are just being disregarded. Why reward those who have created this controversy with another six-year term?

Randy Moody of Lincoln is a retired lawyer and lobbyist. He was one of the architects of the 1992 law authorizing the Nebraska Environmental Trust and was campaign manager for Friends of Education and the Environment, the ballot committee supporting the 1992 constitutional amendment creating the Nebraska Lottery.