

Miller to lead ethics commission

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Larry Miller will lead a state ethics commission along with Kirk Jowers, director of the U's Hinckley Institute of Politics, Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. announced Thursday.

Huntsman created the commission in an effort to increase civic participation and investigate ways to better Utah politics.

Huntsman said during a press conference that Miller will serve as the commission chairman. Miller was unable to be at the press conference because of diabetes-related health complications. He underwent surgery Friday morning to have both legs amputated six inches below the knee. A press release issued by the Utah Jazz said Miller's surgery was successful and that he is recovering well.



Larry H. Miller

Lisa Roskelley, a spokeswoman for the governor, said Huntsman knew of Miller's health problems before selecting him and that the amputation of his legs will not affect his leadership in the commission.

The 18-member Commission on Strengthening Utah's Democracy will include four members with ties to the U, including Jowers; Randy Dryer, chairman of the U Board of Trustees; Dan Jones, a U political science professor and pollster; and Ken Verdoia, director of production for KUED-TV.

"This really is an effort to try and boost participation in our democracy," Huntsman said in the press conference, adding that political apathy in Utah is alarmingly high.

Utah had low voter turnout ratings in the 2008 election. Estimates from George Mason University show that in Utah, 53.8 percent of eligible voters went to the polls. Census statistics for 2006 showed Utah had a lower rating, with only 37 percent voting.

"In a democracy, there is nothing more key to success than citizen participation," Huntsman said.

Dryer said the four members from the U represent the diversity of the commission, which includes political outsiders who will have a fresh look on politics and ways to improve the government process.

The rest of the commission includes members of the Utah Legislature, political observers, media experts and former politicians such as political commentator Frank Pignanelli, radio show host Doug Wright and Utah State Bar Commissioner Yvette Donosso.

"Governor Huntsman wanted to keep the group balanced," Dryer said. "For example, I am a Democrat. I think he wanted the commission to reflect the actual citizens of Utah."

Dryer said they will form a citizen's commission which will make suggestions to the governor, the Legislature, the political parties

and the citizens of Utah.

“We will make recommendations to the people of Utah and have no executive power or authority,” Dryer said. “If our recommendations make sense then hopefully the bodies of power will be pressured enough to take action on that.”

The commission will delve into gray areas of political controversy including campaign fundraising, gifts from lobbyists, personal use of campaign funds and district boundary reform.

Miller is anticipated to be a driving force of the commission, Dryer said.

“I think (Miller) is an excellent choice to chair this commission,” Dryer said. “He is highly visible, a respected businessman and he loves Utah. I suspect he will have an open mind on some issues when others on the commission have already formed their personal opinions.”

Jeffrey Novak, chairman of the Utah-based Coalition for Ethics and Accountability in Government, said he felt Miller was a good choice and had nothing against any of the commission members individually. However, he questioned why a seat was not left open for the average person.

“The choice to include academics, a political pollster, media representatives, lobbyists and party officials may seem broad, but what is missing is the people,” Novak said. “Where is the average person who understands government and knows what needs to be done to make a real change? Nearly all of those selected have a political (or media) connection. I’d much rather see more of the private sector included.”

A timetable has not yet been set for when the commission will first meet or when it will first make its recommendations.

Jowers told The Daily Utah Chronicle in December that he hopes the commission will be ready to give reports and recommendations to the 2010 Legislature. He was not available for comment in this article.

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