

27 seeking PUCO seat; Kasich to get 4 names

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Twenty-seven people have applied for the seat on the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio that is about to be vacated by Chairman Todd Snitchler, including a former state budget director and a prominent consumer advocate.

The applications, which had to be filed by last Thursday, are being reviewed by a nominating commission that will meet this month to interview a few of the candidates they see as most promising. The commission will then send a list of four finalists to the governor, who will make the final pick.

Gov. John Kasich will have two decisions to make: which candidate to select, and whether that person or one of the other four current PUCO members should become the next chairman.

Here are a few of the applicants:

- Tom Johnson, a Columbus Republican, was state budget director under Gov. Bob Taft and represented a southeastern Ohio district in the Ohio House from 1977 to 1999.
- Dave Rinebolt, a Findlay independent, is executive director of Ohio Partners for Affordable Energy, an advocate for low-income utility customers.
- Patrick Donlon, a Columbus Republican, is utility-rate administrator for the PUCO and a former cost analyst for American Electric Power.
- Thomas Crothers, a Toledo Republican, is the recent former director of his city's public-utility department. He held various roles with FirstEnergy, the Akron-based utility, in the 1990s and 2000s.
- James Landers, a Butler County Republican, is a senior engineer at a firm that specializes in utility projects. He was previously an engineer for Duke Energy, the electricity and gas utility that serves the Cincinnati area.
- James Lawniczak, a Cleveland Republican, is a corporate attorney whose work has included utility issues.

Last week, Snitchler announced that he would not apply for a second term. The Stark County Republican has led the commission since 2011. He will serve out his term, which ends in April.

The nominating commission has 12 members, appointed to represent various groups, including utility companies, consumers and local governments. The commission will meet on Jan. 30 to conduct interviews and name the four finalists.

If Kasich does not like any of the finalists, he can request another list.

State law says that the PUCO can have no more than three members who are registered with either party. Since the panel is not at this limit, Kasich does not need to consider party affiliation in making this pick. The current makeup is two Republicans (including Snitchler), two independents and a Democrat.

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