Vandiver rejects higher ed post, citing ‘turmoil’

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The state Board of Regents’ choice for higher education commissioner has quit even before he was officially hired, leaving Louisiana without a titular head of its troubled university system and no known candidates for the job.

Noted historian Frank Vandiver, former president of Texas A&M, said the “turmoil” over his proposed employment terms would undermine his ability to push for improvements in higher education.

“My ability to function . . . would be fatally weakened, especially in making decisions or recommendations which some might find to be controversial,” he said in a letter to Board of Regents chairman George Hardy.

Hardy already had authorized Vandiver to start working under an informal, $60-an-hour consulting agreement while he waited for the board to act on his employment this week.

Hardy negotiated a pay and perks package for Vandiver totaling more than $160,000 a year, about twice the salary of the previous commissioner.

The total included $45,000 to be raised by a private foundation — possibly from unidentified donors — to provide benefits such as a car, membership in a private club and travel expenses for Vandiver and his wife to visit other states and nations.

Regent Norbert Simmons of New Orleans objected to a high public official receiving part of his pay from private sources, and the state ethics commission still had not cleared the arrangement.

Gov. Buddy Roemer, responding to news reports, said he favored Vandiver’s employment, including the privately funded supplements, but opposed the potential for anonymous payments.

“Objections to these administrative arrangements . . . would make it extremely awkward to be an effective commissioner,” Vandiver said in a statement released by Texas A&M in College Station, Texas, where Vandiver now runs a military think tank.

Vandiver reportedly was testifying in a court case in Houston on Tuesday and did not return calls for comment.

In his letter to Hardy, Vandiver suggested the board seek someone who can take the job “untarnished by the conditions which preclude me from serving you effectively.”

In a statement, Hardy said he has suggested to the board’s executive committee a way to quickly pick an interim commissioner while resuming the search for “long-term, high quality leadership for higher education in Louisiana.”

The statement from Hardy, a Lafayette attorney, gave no details of his plan. He reportedly was involved in a legal case Tuesday and did not return calls for comment.

Regent Tom Perkins of Baton Rouge, the only executive committee member who could be reached for comment Tuesday, said it would be inappropriate to discuss Hardy’s plan “until all the parties . . . have had a chance to talk and everybody knows what’s coming . . . .”

But Perkins agreed that the board should act quickly.

“This has dragged on long enough and I think the public perception of the Board of Regents will be diminished if we don’t take some action to get rolling” on improvements for higher education, he said.

Perkins acknowledged that the name of Deputy Commissioner Sharon Beard “has been bandied about” as a possible interim commissioner.

“But I don’t even know if she’s interested,” he said.

Board did not apply for the post after former Commissioner Sally Clausen resigned in August.

Three other Louisiana educators publicly sought the job, but the board decided to conduct an informal, national search for a retired college administrator who could take the job quickly and not be bothered by its lack of job security.

A federal court in New Orleans, ruling on a desegregation case, has ordered the regents — and thus the commissioner’s job — abolished as part of a plan to further integrate Louisiana colleges.

The court order is being appealed and is in a kind of legal limbo, so it’s not certain if, or when, the commissioner’s job might end.

The board offered the job to Vandiver two months ago. He dropped out once, but was coaxed back into contention.

The board was scheduled to finalize his employment terms at Thursday’s regular board meeting.

Vandiver visited the board office last week as part of an agreement, arranged by Hardy, to work as a consultant while obstacles to his hiring were cleared up.

Vandiver’s resignation letter was dated Friday, but Hardy said he did not receive it until Monday.

“This was a truly agonizing decision for me to make,” the letter said.

“I am aware that it may be embarrassing to all concerned in the short-run — it certainly is for me — but I fear that my accepting the position would do serious harm to your long-range plans to improve public higher education in Louisiana,” Vandiver said.

Vandiver, 64, has run several college campuses, including Texas A&M for several years. He has written several award-winning books about American military history, particularly about the Confederate side of the Civil War.