

Lt. Gov., State Museum board at odds

Members say Nungesser's interference hurtful

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Meddling by Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser has left the Louisiana State Museum leaderless and adrift, according to several members of the museum's board, threatening the long-term future of some of the state's most significant historical buildings and artifacts.

The museum's interim director, Tim Chester, quit Monday with a broadside accusing Nungesser of commandeering museum property for his own use and inserting himself into day-to-day operations.

In interviews this week, board members said they were deeply concerned about Chester's accusations and worried that relations between the museum and the Lieutenant Governor's Office, which oversees museum operations, have reached an all-time low.

Ultimately, the dust-up could hurt any effort to lure a well-qualified long-term director, something the museum has lacked for most of the past decade.

"Once again I find the museum awfully vulnerable," said Rosemary Upshaw Ewing, of Quitman, who serves on the board. "It concerns me that we seem to be without a rudder. But we've survived before. We'll make it again."

The museum system is part of the state's Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, which since the 1970s has been - unlike all other state agencies - under the control of the lieutenant governor, rather than the governor,

though its budget is still determined by the administration. However, the museum had an independent board, made up of members from around the state that hired the director.

That changed about 10 years ago, when the Legislature, at the behest of then-Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, gave the lieutenant governor more control over the board plus the authority to hire and fire the director.

With six directors in the decade since then, many board members said

they fear that a ship that seemed to be on the right track under Chester - a respected museum consultant brought in on an interim basis after Nungesser last year fired the director hired under former Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne could slide back into turmoil it's seen in recent years.

The State Museum oversees the Old U.S. Mint, Cabildo, Presbytere, Lower Pontalba Building and other historic buildings in the French Quarter, plus museums in Baton Rouge and other cities. Its collections contain tens of thousands of historical artifacts.

Its position as part of a department run by the lieutenant governor has often created friction, with museum leaders saying those elected officials sometimes seemed more interested in using the museum as a source of publicity and political benefit for themselves than in doing what was in the long-range interest of the museum system.

The museum's 21-member board is drawn in part from groups that serve as museum fundraisers or watchdogs over various museum properties, plus appointments by the lieutenant governor. Many of the board members declined to comment about the situation this week.

But several members said they are worried about Chester's allegations, which included claims that Nungesser was interfering with day-to-day operations at the museum and that he had taken the keys to a Lower Pontalba Building apartment that is typically used to house guest speakers and dignitaries and was using it for his own purposes.

Nungesser has denied the allegations about his use of the apartment, saying he used it only two or three times himself and that on other occasions it was made available to legislators, tourism officials and musicians. He said there is no reason he should be denied the ability to check on the buildings.

But board members said demands that Nungesser or his staff get keys to the apartment and other buildings raise concerns about security and how the buildings will be used, as well as going against policies that give the museum director the final say over those matters.

"We've had a hard time, as Tim indicated, keeping people in the director's position because of political involvement, and it would be really difficult ... for us to attract someone experienced and knowledgeable in the museum field knowing what they would be up against," board member Tamra Carboni said. "Frankly, now it's worse than ever."

Chester's resignation also raised new alarm about Nungesser's proposal last year to sell some parts of the museum's collection that are now in storage and about his general handling of museum property.

That, Carboni said, could raise red flags with people considering whether to donate historical artifacts and possibly with the organization that determines whether the museum is accredited.

"There's a phrase in the museum field: We hold things in the public trust," said Carboni, a former State Museum employee who also handled accreditation reviews for the American Alliance of Museums. "When you have someone, a lieutenant governor, who talks about selling things off to anybody who will listen, you're clearly eroding the public trust."

"We have a collection largely made up of donations from Louisiana citizens. For them to hear they may be sold off it makes it very difficult to get donations in the future, to say nothing of funds in the future," she said.

Nungesser has stuck by his comments that some items might benefit the museum more by being sold and bringing in revenue, particularly given the budget woes facing the state, rather than remaining out of sight in storage.

Chester was hired in October in what many board members described as an effort to get the museum back on track after significant turnover in recent years. That, they said, was meant to be a one-year effort that would culminate with an attempt to bring on a permanent director.

"I think we described it as the ship was about to be righted. The museum, like all cultural institutions, struggles with state support," Ewing said. "There was such a tempestuous lack of stability in the director's office."

After Chester's resignation, Nungesser said Chester was not moving fast enough on finding a replacement or making changes he had requested.

But board members sang Chester's praises while saying that Nungesser had increasingly become involved in the day-to-day operations of the museum, including appointing an employee who reported to him rather than to the director.

"We have never had this level of everyday management from the Lieutenant Governor's Office," board member Julie Breitmeyer said.

"I don't ascribe any bad intentions in terms of personal gain or anything like that. I don't think that's what any of this is about," she said.

"He does want to get as much money as he can into his department. He just doesn't understand the laws that govern the museum."

In some ways, the issues with Nungesser are a continuation of tensions between the lieutenant governor and the board that date back decades. In recent years, the resolution of those disagreements has been tipped toward the lieutenant governor.

When Landrieu succeeded in getting the Legislature to give him - rather than the board the power to hire and fire the director, several board members said, that set the stage for some of the instability within the institution.

That law was later amended to give the board some power over the process. The board now submits a list of three nominees, with the lieutenant governor having the final say.

Chester's departure may make finding a new director difficult, board members said.

"When you go out to solicit for applications, museum professionals are in the category of college professors and doctors and things like that: A good one is attractive to anyone who needs one. They can go anywhere," Ewing said. "It's going to be difficult to attract a professional."