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IN MY OPINION / JACK BETTS

Not much progress for board

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RALEIGH - By law, Gov. Mike Easley is chairman of a state board whose job it is to take regular soundings of how the state's doing on key public policy areas such as education, the economy and the environment. If the Senate gets its way, he won't be chairman much longer -- won't even be on the board, in fact.

Heading the N.C. Progress Board is not a role Easley has embraced. In fact, Progress Board members have the sense the governor, whose advisers have objected to the way the board uses available data, would prefer that it went away.

Cari Boyce, Easley's spokesperson, said the governor was unaware the Senate had planned to cut him out of the board and said Easley "believes the Progress Board serves a valuable function." But she also noted the board, and the proposal to reshape it, are not among Easley's priorities. He hoped, she added, there might be ways to make the board "more effective."

The board wasn't Easley's idea. That credit belongs to Gov. Jim Hunt, who engineered creation of the Progress Board as a result of the benchmarking movement that in the 1990s began to transform the way government does business. It's based on the notion that governments ought to have a way to measure how they're doing on important public policy issues and to set goals for making progress. The N.C. Progress Board was set up to assess the state's performance on scores of issues.

But as we found out years ago, not all politicians like these kinds of measurements. Some of them fear the wrong data will be used. Some fear that other politicians will misuse the data. And perhaps some of them fear that the data will be used, accurately, to measure their own performance.

I remember what happened in 1988 when the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research recommended the state develop an Environmental Index to gauge the state of its environment and help set policy goals for improvement. The legislature seemed to hate the idea, but Gov. Jim Martin thought it would be helpful. He ordered the executive branch to develop it anyway. It did, producing several environmental reports loaded with data but without the kind of easily accessible conclusions that might help the state decide what to do next.

The N.C. Progress Board's reports (see www.ncprogress.org) are more focused. They use available data to show improvement or decline in a number of areas. The latest measures, for instance, show improvement in air quality in the environmental section, but a decline in reading and writing proficiency in the education section.

But state support for the Progress Board has waned during Easley's governorship. It now has offices on N.C. State's Centennial Campus but has seen its funding drop. The Senate hasn't recommended more funding, but it has offered a revision of its leadership, sponsored by Sen. A.B. Swindell, a Progress Board member and Democrat from Nash County.

Its budget includes a special provision that removes the governor as an ex officio member of the board, strikes a section naming the governor or his designee the chairman and reduces the number of the governor's appointees to the board from eight to six. The House and Senate each would get an additional appointee, as would the board, which would name the chair.

This provision to sharply reduce the governor's role on the Progress Board may help make the board more nimble. It won't have to wait for the governor to sign off on its reports. But it won't have the enthusiastic help of a future Hunt-like governor who relishes these kinds of assessments, either.

Mack Pearsall, a businessman and board member whose personal donations have kept the board afloat, hopes the House will provide more money for its operations and regional assessments and forecasts state and local government can use.

The Senate plan presents Gov. Easley an opportunity to decide whether he wants to retain a role on the Progress Board -- but, as Boyce says, it's not something he's going to focus on.

Nothing new there.

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