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After nearly two months of "grueling" scrutiny and relentless vocal opposition, Carleton Ching's high-profile and ill-fated nomination to head one of the most important state agencies in Hawaii was pulled Wednesday just moments before the Senate was to vote on it.

According to sources at the Capitol, it still wasn't clear heading into Wednesday's floor session whether Gov. David Ige had the votes he needed in the Senate to approve his pick of Ching, a longtime lobbyist for developers, as chairman of the Board of Land and Natural Resources.

Then, after a 20-minute caucus behind closed doors, and a 20-minute recess in which most senators chatted among themselves on the floor, Senate President Donna Mercado Kim (D, Kalihi Valley-Moanalua-Halawa) approached the lectern and made the official announcement: Ige had withdrawn Ching's nomination.

There would be no Senate vote on the most dramatic test of Ige's political resolve in his governorship so far — at least not a public one.

"It didn't become obvious that he did not have majority support until shortly before session this morning," Ige said in a news conference Wednesday after withdrawing Ching's nod.

"From my perspective, I did not want to put Carleton or his family through a floor vote if we did not have a majority support," he added.

The move also spared many of Hawaii's 25 state senators from casting a vote on the record in the contentious battle, which saw a petition with nearly 7,600 signatures against his nomination, about 1,120 groups and people testifying against and about 272 testifying in support.

Ige said he'll start from scratch to find another nominee to lead the Department of Land and Natural Resources, which oversees some 1.3 million acres of state land, 750 miles of coastline, fisheries, reserves and other resources unique to Hawaii. Ige didn't give many specifics on the kind of candidate he'll seek other than someone "that shares my values of open and honest communication" and someone who's "respectful and considering all views."

Ige said he's willing to accept resumes from organizations looking to provide input, but that a search committee will not figure into the process.

Ching, who is vice president of community relations for one of the state's largest developers, stood behind Ige during the news conference. He acknowledged that he was disappointed not to lead DLNR but considered the nomination process fair.

"We move forward," Ching, who is on paid leave from Castle & Cooke, said of his family Wednesday. "This

is not a setback for me. I believe I'm better for it."

Ching said that he has the option to return to the company but that he also "may have another option to do something else."

Throughout the nomination process, opponents have expressed that Ching, who also served on the boards of the Building Industry Association and developer-advocacy Land Use Research Foundation, could put his skills to better use at an agency other than DLNR.

On Wednesday, Ige said they had not yet explored the idea and that most of his administration department head positions had already been filled. However, Ige was willing to consider looking for another role for Ching in his administration. The Senate has a deadline of April 6 for appointments to be considered this session.

Ching, meanwhile, said he would leave it up to Ige. Ching added that "frankly" he would not want to "have to go through this process again."

Ige insisted throughout the nomination process that Ching's managerial skills and integrity made him the best candidate to lead DLNR. Ching, Ige said, offered a fresh perspective to the agency coming from outside state government.

But opponents and some senators worried that Ching's longtime role as a lobbyist for developers would put him at odds with DLNR's mission.

Members of the Senate Water and Land Committee voted 5-2 last week against Ching's nomination after several of them, including committee Chairwoman and former DLNR head Sen. Laura Thielen (D, Hawaii Kai-Waimanalo-Kailua), said they felt that Ching lacked sufficient experience and did not fully grasp DLNR issues and responsibilities. Thielen was further taken aback when Ching said he wasn't aware of LURF efforts to lobby against safeguards that protect public beach access while he was on the foundation's board.

In a scathing report released this week, the committee asserted that Ching failed "to provide any clear vision for the DLNR beyond complying with the law and following the mission, lead(ing) us to conclude he does not have the requisite qualifications for the job."

To a certain extent, the withdrawal of Ching's nomination ahead of a Senate vote demonstrated the sway that environmental and conservation interests maintain in Hawaii politics. Many of the groups that supported Ching's pick were tied to construction trade and business-oriented pursuits, while those opposing were generally environmental advocates and conservation-oriented.

"This was an extremely grueling process" for everyone involved, Marti Townsend, executive director of the Outdoor Circle, said in the Capitol courtyard after the Senate session.

"We recognize that (Ige) has the best interests for Hawaii at heart," and the group and its allies looks forward to working with the governor on a more amenable nominee going forward, Townsend said.

"It was the pono thing to do. It respected the views of many people," said Pauline MacNeil, a concerned resident who attended Wednesday to oppose the Ching nomination. "You need somebody with experience" and during the hearings on Ching's nomination he didn't come across as someone with depth on the issues, MacNeil said.

However, the withdrawal of Ching's nomination didn't sit well with some senators.

Sen. Lorraine Inouye (D, Kaupulehu-Waimea-North Hilo) was visibly upset about the withdrawal on Wednesday. Speaking on the Senate floor, she described Ching as a "hope and the need for change" within DLNR, which she said has caused much uncertainty for some small businesses and hotels, particularly on Hawaii island, by not awarding long-term leases to them.

"I think we need to stop this crazy cancer that is in the division of DLNR," Inouye said.

Meanwhile, Sen. Sam Slom, the chamber's lone Republican, blasted his Democratic colleagues for depriving the public of a chance to hear them discuss publicly the nomination.

"They were wimps not to vote in front of us," added Paula Ress, a Kailua resident and opponent of Ching's nomination.

"I feel for the nominee and his family because he's a good man," Thielen said Wednesday, adding that the process was "tough for everybody involved."

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