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Penn president to get NEH job, sources say

Sheldon Hackney will be nominated to lead the National Endowment for the Humanities.

By Steve Goldstein
INQUIRER WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — University of Pennsylvania president Sheldon Hackney is about to be named to head the National Endowment for the Humanities, sources said yesterday.

"The announcement is imminent," a White House official said.

"I understand that everything is a go," said a Capitol Hill source familiar with the selection process, who asked not to be identified. "Everything is moving forward and we expect an announcement soon."

The sources cautioned, however, that the process was not complete. As is standard procedure, background

checks are being done on Hackney and, as the source said, "it ain't over till it's over. Just ask Zoe Baird."

The reference was to President Clinton's first choice for attorney general, who withdrew her name from consideration during Judiciary Committee hearings that focused on her hiring of an illegal immigrant as a nanny.

Hackney should not have that problem. His three children, Virginia, Fain and Elizabeth, are grown and out of the house.

Penn's chief executive met in Washington yesterday with administration officials, and his appointment could be announced as early as Monday. His nomination would have to be confirmed by the Senate.

After returning to the campus in the afternoon, Hackney declined to comment.

Hackney, 59, has been Penn president since 1981. Born in Birmingham, Ala., he is an award-winning scholar of Southern history and holds degrees from Vanderbilt and Yale Universities. Hackney previously taught at Princeton and was the

president of Tulane University for six years beginning in 1975.

The National Endowment for the Humanities is supposed to be the liaison between the federal government and the academic community.

Hackney would move from a large university with 22,400 students and a budget of \$1.52 billion to a relatively small agency (by federal standards) with fewer than 300 employees and a budget of about \$177.5 million.

The NEH wields a big stick, however. Last year, the agency made



Sheldon Hackney, 59, has headed Penn since 1981.

Penn's president will be named to lead NEH, sources say

2,199 grants totaling \$159.1 million to the nation's libraries, museums, colleges and individual scholars.

The nomination of Hackney, an outspoken supporter of freedom of expression, could set off alarms among conservatives on Capitol Hill. In 1989, he defended the decision of Penn's Institute of Contemporary Art to exhibit the controversial photographs of the late Robert Mapplethorpe, which had been labeled obscene by Sen. Jesse Helms (R., N.C.) and some other lawmakers.

Penn's 21st president has been the front-runner for the NEH job almost since his name surfaced in February. He was recommended to President Clinton's team by Vartan Gregorian, the former Penn provost who is president of Brown University.

Accentuating Hackney's considerable credentials is the fact that his wife, lawyer Lucy Judkins Durr, was a member of the board of the Children's Defense Fund when Hillary Rodham Clinton was the fund's president.

Sen. Harris Wofford (D., Pa.), a

former Bryn Mawr College president, has been quarterbacking the nomination.

"Harris has been a strong proponent of Sheldon's appointment to the position," said spokesman David Stone. "He will be very enthused if and when it comes about."

The excess caution surrounding the announcement stems not only from the Baird-Kimba Wood debacle at Justice, but also from the administration's sensitivity to issues of gender and race in making appointments.

Originally, the NEH appointment was supposed to come in tandem with nominations to head the other two big arts agencies, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute for Museum Services.

But sources said the NEA and IMS appointments are lagging behind the pace of the Hackney nomination.

Hackney would replace Lynne V. Cheney, the wife of former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, who resigned at the end of the Bush administration.