Fears of tuition hikes tripping up autonomy

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When Minnesota became a state in 1858, its constitution recognized the University of Minnesota — which was established seven years earlier — as autonomous and guaranteed its continued independence under leadership of a board of regents.

Fast forward 150 years to find the UW System still coveting much of its neighbor’s freedom from legislative oversight and political influence, especially with massive looming cuts that were at one point tempered by the prospect of autonomy.

But autonomy for Wisconsin’s universities is becoming more elusive. The co-chairman and another Republican member of the Legislature’s powerful budget committee panel said Wednesday that they don’t support giving the UW more independence from state oversight, in another sign of dwindling support for Gov. Scott Walker’s proposal to do just that.

Joint Finance Committee co-Chairman Rep. John Nygren, R-Marinette, and Rep. Dean Knudson, R-Hudson, said they are against turning the UW System into a public authority under which they would have independence from state laws and oversight, including the setting of tuition.

University leaders, who have pushed for years for more autonomy, backed that part of Walker’s plan. But many in the Republican-controlled Legislature are loathe to give up the power to set tuitions, fearing that the UW Board of Regents would raise it dramatically if given the authority.

“The big fight’s been about tuition,” said UW-Eau Claire Chancellor James Schmidt during an editorial board meeting with the Leader-Telegram on Wednesday. “In the public authority there’s nothing that stops the Legislature from still imposing their judgment over the Board of Regents because it’s a state law and therefore can be changed.”

Nygren and Knudson said some additional flexibility may be warranted, but nothing as dramatic as what Walker wants.

But Schmidt said the system isn’t a monopoly and charging high tuition rates would prompt legislators to “push the red button.”

Nygren and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos previously had said they weren’t convinced that giving UW more autonomy would lead to any meaningful changes.
Although Schmidt likes to remain optimistic, he heard from longer-tenured Wisconsin chancellors who predicted the prospects of autonomy would quickly fizzle out.

While Phil Lyons, UW-Stout vice chancellor for administrative and student life services, said there were “ambitious” goals in Walker's budget, he expects to see some compromise.

“This may be sausage-making at its best,” he said.

The UW Regents earlier this month passed a resolution calling on the Legislature to give them the specific authority to adopt tenure and shared governance policies exactly as they’re currently written in state law. Under Walker’s plan, those statutes would end on July 1, 2016, the date when autonomy would begin.

Walker’s spokeswoman Laurel Patrick, repeating a comment from Tuesday, said the governor remains committed to working with lawmakers, the UW System and others to find a proposal everyone can support.