

McNair quits commission

Pioneering black leader, 75, praised for integrity, service to county, state

03/30/01

VICKII HOWELL

News staff writer

Commissioner Chris McNair stunned a roomful of Jefferson County department heads and a fellow commissioner when the pioneering black public official announced that Thursday was his last day in office.

Commissioner Mary Buckelew put her hand to his forehead as if she were checking for fever. "You're kidding," she said.

But McNair, leaning back in his chair, said he had sent his resignation to Gov. Don Siegelman early Thursday. That statement drew more gasps of shock and sadness in a 10 a.m. commission agenda-setting meeting.

About an hour later, Circuit Judge Houston Brown swore in McNair's successor, the Rev. Steve Small Jr., during a brief ceremony in the former commissioner's courthouse office.

McNair, 75, said his surprise resignation had nothing to do with his health nor next month's trial of two former Ku Klux Klan members accused in the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The blast killed his 11-year-old daughter, Denise.

"Oh no, no way. I've made it 37 years without talking about it," he said.

Rather, McNair said he wants to spend more time with his wife, Maxine, and to focus on the photography business he runs with his two daughters.

"I'm going to start looking for a small mobile home so me and my wife can travel around," he said. "If I want to stop and take a picture of something, I can do it without being in a hurry."

McNair's resignation took nearly everyone by surprise.

"Well let me get my breath," said a stunned Mrs. Buckelew. "We all need to have a prayer meeting after this ... I knew something was up when you were on time," she said to the always late-arriving McNair.

Mrs. Buckelew and Commission President Gary White, who was reached out of town, praised McNair for his long public service in the Legislature and on the County Commission.

She said McNair is well respected in both the black and white communities and set the pace for honesty and integrity among politicians. He has also been a friend who took her under his wing and cast a deciding vote to make her commission president in 1991.

"I learned a lot from him," she said. "He worked well with me, with all the commissioners. We've built one heck of a team here, and whoever replaces him has got some big shoes to fill. I only hope they bring one-half of this man's integrity and commitment to the job."

She said McNair also can be headstrong, saying it was nearly impossible to change his mind once he made a decision. "At the same time, I always found him to be open-minded on the issues," she said. "I will miss him."

White said McNair a year ago had mentioned the possibility of stepping down, but he too was surprised by the resignation.

White, who served with McNair when they both were in the Legislature, said McNair always did what he said he would do. In Montgomery politics, "that was certainly refreshing," White said.

"We served 10 years together on the County Commission. During that time, he's done a very good job," he said.

The two other commissioners - Bettye Fine Collins and Jeff Germany - were out of town and could not be reached for comment Thursday.

'A model for everybody'

Birmingham Mayor Bernard Kincaid, who earned McNair's support in the 1999 mayoral race, said McNair's resignation was a loss.

"The people of Jefferson County will never have a more dedicated and caring public servant than Chris McNair," Kincaid said. "I am proud to claim him as an ally and, more importantly, as a friend."

After McNair explained his reasons for leaving, county officials gave him a standing ovation. Some wiped tears from their eyes.

"Lord, I had a lot of respect for that man. This hurts," said a teary Roy Burnett, the county's risk manager.

"This man is a model for everybody, black or white. Ever since I've known him, he's never played this 'black vs. white' business. He never used his notoriety to get anywhere ... I'm personally going to miss him," Burnett said.

For years, McNair made it a rule not to talk about his daughter's death to avoid the appearance of using it for political or personal gain. Instead, the professional photographer turned his energies toward community activism and politics.

Since 1973, when he became one of the first blacks elected to the Alabama House of Representatives since Reconstruction, McNair has been a fixture in state and county politics. He was elected three times to the Legislature, where he often took conservative stances, sometimes opposing other black officials. He's been on the County Commission since 1986.

He built a reputation as an independent who defied being branded with any political label. He was also known for his integrity and hard-working dedication.

McNair gained national media attention in 1992 in a David vs. Goliath fight for the U.S. Senate seat of incumbent Richard Shelby, then a Democrat. He lost that race against Shelby, and another one in 1978.

'I'll miss it'

As commissioner, McNair oversaw environmental services, which in 1996 embarked on the state's most expensive public works project. A federal court ordered the overhaul of every sewer system in Jefferson County in 12 years. The project has run up a \$1.97 billion tab in six years and is expected to cost even more. And so will sewer customers' bills.

Though known for his frugality, McNair received criticism from environmentalists who accused him and his department heads of spending hundreds of millions on building new sewer lines rather than fixing old ones.

He has dismissed such criticisms, saying the county must follow the court's orders, and it must prepare for future growth.

McNair said he'll most miss the people he came to know and the pleasure of working for the people of Jefferson County.

"I'll miss it. But it's just come that time that I have to turn the page and go on to a new chapter," he said. "It's been a joy."

© The Birmingham News. Used with permission.