

Wambach to retire from circuit court next March

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JEFFERSON — Jefferson County Circuit Court Judge David Wambach has confirmed his intention to step down from the bench effective March 31, 2017.

Wambach submitted a retirement letter last week to state and county officials announcing his intention to retire after 32 years of public service as both a prosecutor and judge.

Gov. Scott Walker appointed Wambach to the bench in June 2013, filling the seat vacated by Judge Jacqueline R. Erwin, who retired in January 2013 after 34 years serving as both a prosecutor and judge.

Prior to his appointment, Wambach had been an assistant attorney general with the Wisconsin Department of Justice since November 2008, and Jefferson County district attorney from 1997 to November 2008.

Judge Wambach said he presented his notice six months in advance to give the governor's office ample time to undertake the process of accepting applications for the appointment.

“Hopefully, the governor is not rushed in any way in making the best decision possible for the people of Jefferson County and the State of Wisconsin,” Wambach said Thursday, noting that he also had an eye toward ensuring there was the least disruption and the smoothest transition between his retirement and the appointment of his successor so that the court system is not without a judge any longer than might have to be required by the logistics of the situation.

An appointee will serve through April 2018, at which time an election for the seat would be held.

Wambach's retirement letter was sent to Gov. Scott Walker, Wisconsin Supreme Court Chief Justice Patience Rogensack, Director of State Courts J. Dennis Moran, Jefferson County Circuit Court and Judicial District III Presiding Judge Randy Koschnick, District III Court Administrator Michael Niemon, Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier and Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Chairperson Jim Schroeder.



Judge David Wambach

“It has been my personal privilege and professional honor to serve the citizens of Wood and Jefferson counties and the State of Wisconsin in various capacities as a dedicated public servant since July 1, 1985,” Wambach wrote in his letter. “In that time, I have tried my utmost to demonstrate my passion to justice and the rule of law in an ethical, forthright and compassionate fashion. I have strove to make the counties and state that I served better places than when I arrived.”

Continuing, the letter states, “I have endeavored to litigate, educate, facilitate, collaborate and preside in ways that have positively shaped and developed the law and improved the level of those who practice the law. I consider myself quite fortunate to have been able to relish the opportunities that I have had and to have been surrounded and supported along the way by so very many other dedicated and committed public servants.”

Wambach declined to comment further to the Daily Union about his reasons for retiring, indicating that he would elaborate on his service closer to his retirement.

The outgoing judge was lauded by county officials for his many years of service.

As a senior in college, Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier served as an intern in the Jefferson County District Attorney’s Office while Wambach was district attorney.

“Over the last three years, I’ve had a great opportunity to work with Judge Wambach,” Wehmeier said. “He has been very involved in what we’ve been doing in terms of the policy side, looking at treatment court alternatives.”

In addition, he said, Wambach always has been a great supporter of the staff.

“Every time we have a conversation, he always wants to make sure the staff is taken care of,” Wehmeier said. “He is just a gentleman and I wish him the best in his retirement as he looks at the next part of his life, but also his distinguished career in public service, from being the district attorney to assistant attorney general to the culmination of his career as judge for Jefferson County.”

County board Chairperson Schroeder also wished Wambach well, having worked with him during his time as district attorney and as judge.

“He is extremely conscientious and thorough in his work,” Schroeder said. “I was impressed with the great thought he put into his arguments and his judgements. He will be missed on the bench in Jefferson County.”

Judge Koschnick noted that he has known and worked with Judge Wambach in one capacity or another for nearly 25 years.

“I consider him to be not only a friend, but also a dedicated, hardworking public servant,” Koschnick said. “When he was the district attorney and I was a defense attorney in Jefferson County the 1990s, we sparred in court on a daily basis. He was always well-prepared and he took his responsibility to do justice and to protect the public very seriously.”

The judge described Wambach as being a strong proponent of victim’s rights and always believing in respecting the rights of the defendants.

“Later in his career, as a judge, he served with honor and distinction, always staying true to his oath to uphold our state and federal Constitutions, as well as to apply the law fairly and impartially,” Koschnick said. “Judge Wambach has provided a tremendous service to the public and he will be missed. I wish him well in his retirement.”

From his own recollections during campaign interviews in 2014, Wambach recalled that it was an attorney he met during a job fair in high school that drew him to the legal profession. He said the attorney said that lawyers need to be wordsmiths, as words are the tools of their trade. Having been involved in public speaking since eighth grade, Wambach thought it was a skill set he already had.

Right then as a freshman, Wambach planned to become a lawyer. And he followed that path, earning his bachelor’s degree from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in 1981 and his law degree from Marquette University in 1985.

It was during his third year in law school that he was introduced to prosecution as he transferred from the civil division to the prosecution division within the Milwaukee city attorney’s office.

After graduation, Wambach said, he looked for work in two primary areas, prosecution and labor law, based upon his family’s long union background.

He began his legal career as an assistant district attorney in Wood County from 1985-88 and then was hired as an assistant district attorney by then-District Attorney Jacqueline Erwin.

After 11 years as an assistant under Erwin and now-retired District Attorney Linda Larson, Wambach was elected to Jefferson County district attorney in 1997, serving in that capacity until November 2008. He then worked as a prosecutor with the state attorney general’s office until being appointed to the bench.

Wambach was recognized three times throughout his career with a “Prosecutor of the Year Award.” He also was lauded by Mothers Against Drunk Driving for his leadership on criminal-justice issues and the Jefferson Rotary Club with a “Service Above Self” award.

According to court records, none of the homicide convictions he prosecuted ever have been reversed on appeal.

According to past statements by the retiring judge, he had set a number of goals for himself to attain as a prosecutor. He wanted to be good enough to teach his fellow lawyers and wanted to be the sort of person other people could turn to for answers.

More than 20 times, Wambach has been invited to teach other lawyers at both state and national levels.

Upon reaching all those goals by the time he was serving in the Department of Justice, Wambach said, the prospect of having new challenges as a judge was very appealing.

Prior to the April 2014 election, he pointed out that, similar to when he started as a prosecutor, Wambach already had set goals for himself as a judge, starting with meeting the judicial philosophy he had set out for himself.

“The last day I take my robe off and can look back and say ‘I improved people’s lives one at a time for having come before the court and I improved the way we do things systemically in the courts,’ that would be a lot to be proud of,” he said.

“The pride is not because of what I accomplish, but the positive difference that it makes,” Wambach concluded.