

Judge Dehner to leave bench at term's end

Legal community gives jurist high marks on courtroom career

By JOE HOSEY
THE COURIER

Circuit Judge Gerald Dehner will not run for retention this November, ending his 12-year tenure at the helm of the county's judicial system.

Dehner, 55, said simply, "It's time to move on," while talking with a reporter in his chambers.

His wife, Susan Dehner, said, "It's his decision, but I'm supporting it.

"It's time for a change. He's going to do some teaching. I'm ready to see him more relaxed, because it's stressful."

Word of Dehner's retirement shocked an unsuspecting Logan County legal community.

"You catch me by surprise because Gerry's a young man," said Bill Bates, a Lincoln attorney who worked with Dehner in private practice from 1979 to 1981.

Attorney Robert Barry, also surprised, said, "I've always gotten along with Judge Dehner, both in practice and since he's been on the bench. He's going to be missed."

Dehner, a Lincoln native, graduated from Vanderbilt college and completed one year of law school at Washington University before joining the Navy in 1964.

He returned to Washington University on the GI Bill in 1969 and graduated in 1972.

A Vietnam veteran, Dehner retired from the reserves in 1990, holding the rank of lieutenant commander.

Dehner served 10 years as At-

lanta city attorney, following that with a four-year stint as Lincoln city attorney and then a half-term as Logan County state's attorney.

Two years after his election to state's attorney, Dehner was elected to replace Judge John McCullough, who left for a seat on the state appellate bench.

After his term ends in December 1998, Dehner said he plans to continue teaching law classes at Heartland Community College.

"I thank the people of Logan County for the opportunity to serve them for 12 years," he said.

During those 12 years, Dehner sentenced then 15-year-old murderer Jon Morgan to a 75-prison sentence following what he called, "one of the biggest, if not the biggest," trials in his time on the bench.

State Rep. John Turner, R-Atlanta, state's attorney during the Dehner era, was also taken aback by the judge's decision not to seek retention.

"He sure served the citizens in exemplary fashion," he said. "I wish him the best in his career move or retirement, whatever the case may be."

Turner said, as state's attorney, "I appeared before him on a daily basis. He ran a very good courtroom, and he's to be commended for that."

Associate Judge David Coogan said of his colleague, "I think he's done a good job and I

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have to commend him for his service to the community.”

Tabbed as a likely candidate in the race to replace Dehner, Coogan said, “I’m not giving it a yes or no right now, but I would very seriously consider running for circuit judge.”

Logan County Clerk Carla Bender praised Dehner for his integrity and diligence, and spoke of him as a fixture in the county courtroom.

“It will certainly be an adjustment to have someone else in that seat,” she said.

Deputy clerk Cheryl Hedrick, who worked next to Dehner in felony court for the past four years, said, “He comes into court well prepared and he’s fair in his decisions.

“His courtroom’s very or-

derly, and I’ll miss him. I’ll miss him very much.”

Dehner’s retirement opens the gates for the rare circuit judge race Sept. 16, when candidates can begin circulating petitions.

Bender said she considers Coogan, “an excellent candidate,” but added, “There are several attorneys in the area who will be interested.”

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