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TOP STORY

End of an era: Richards reflects on unexpected 42-year career

By WES SWIETEK wswietek@bgdailynews.com Apr 14, 2018



When Jody Richards first entered the state Capitol in Frankfort as a legislator in 1977, he did not envision spending the next four decades as a public servant.

“I never imagined it being so long. I intended to stay a maximum of six years,” Richards said.

Instead, he has spent more than half of his 80 years as a legislator.

Richards attended his last General Assembly session last week (barring a special session being called this year). The Bowling Green Democrat announced in January he would not seek re-election to the seat he has held for 42 years.

As he prepared Thursday for the final days of the 2018 regular session, Richards spoke to the Daily News about his extraordinary tenure, one that was unexpectedly prolonged after he won his first election in November 1976.

Richards said he only planned to serve a maximum of three two-year terms, but then was named an education committee chair, then caucus chair and finally House speaker for 14 years. They were leadership positions Richards said he felt he shouldn't abandon.

Through it all, education has been Richards' focus as a legislator, and education issues were at the forefront this session as well; albeit not in the way he envisioned with contentious debate about education funding and changes to educators' pensions.

When asked if he was disappointed in what some perceive as attacks on education this session, his emphatic response was “Absolutely. I went to the legislature to do what I could to promote education, which is the key to make the kind of income folks want to make and to enjoy life. Any time we take steps back, it's harmful to Kentucky's future.”

Richards was involved in development of the Kentucky Transpark, where a road bears his name, and said when he has been involved in recruiting businesses here, “the first thing they ask about is our education system,” he said.

That’s why, when asked about his biggest accomplishments – and regrets – education is the theme.

“I think the 1990 Education Reform Act was the highlight of my tenure,” he said. The act equalized school funding across the state, led to the formation of school-based decision-making councils and reformed assessment testing.

After the reforms, “high school graduation rates have risen considerably,” Richards said, from near the bottom in the country to among the highest. “Over time that will really help Kentucky.”

That was followed up in 1997 with changes to the way the state oversees the state’s community colleges.

“They have really thrived since then,” he said.

But education is also the source of his biggest regret as a legislator: “We have not been able to fund higher education properly. Universities have built-in costs they can’t do anything about, so they have had to raise tuition,” Richards said, which in turn has blunted enrollment and burdened many graduates with massive student debt.

Richards, a Western Kentucky University graduate and instructor, has drawn effusive praise from local officials for his impact on education during his tenure.

“WKU is our largest employer and WKU has always been at the forefront of his thoughts in Frankfort,” Bowling Green Mayor Bruce Wilkerson said. “He has also supported (all education) in general, and that has provided so much for our region and community.”

The Warren County Board of Education in 2012 named an elementary school in Richards' honor, and WKU last year named its mass media and communications building Jody Richards Hall.

“Representative Richards has provided outstanding leadership on many issues important to our community,” Bowling Green Independent School District Superintendent Gary Fields said in a statement last January when Richards announced his retirement. “He is always accessible to discuss important issues and consistently advocated for the kids of Kentucky. His leadership will be greatly missed in Frankfort.”

Warren County Public Schools Superintendent Rob Clayton also said in a January statement: “Jody Richards has been a tremendous friend of education and he has left an indelible mark on the education community not only in the southcentral region of Kentucky but across the Commonwealth.”



WKU President Timothy Caboni said in a statement to the Daily News last week that Richards “has been an incredible champion for Kentucky, for Bowling Green and for Western Kentucky University. It’s been a joy and privilege to develop a friendship with him over the past year, and his deep love for this university has been an inspiration to me.

“We are so grateful for his leadership and for the fact that education has been his passion and priority throughout his more than 40 years of public service. He’s been a driving force behind major reform efforts for K-12 and higher education, and he was a leader in the creation of the Gatton Academy for Mathematics and Science in Kentucky as well as on a number of policy initiatives that led to the addition of engineering and advanced practice doctorate programs at WKU – all of which allow us to provide a trained and educated workforce to serve our region and the Commonwealth.”

That kind of praise has followed Richards in the halls of the state Capitol this last session.

“Everyone has been very, very nice to me. I’ve gotten good committee assignments ... I guess they deferred to an old man,” he said with a laugh. “It was a good experience other than it being such a hectic session.”

Richards said his decision to not seek re-election was simply a matter of it being time to move on, and said he would like to continue teaching a Kentucky government class at WKU and is exploring writing a related book.

“There is not really a good Kentucky government book,” he said.

Richards, who twice ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2002 and 2007, will continue to be a legislator through the end of the year and plans to attend the committee meetings “that can be very important to prepare for the next session,” he said.

Richards had been a member of the majority party in the state House his entire career until Republicans gained control in the 2016 election. He said he hopes legislators work in a bipartisan manner in the future: “That’s when we do our best work,” he said.

When that work resumes in 2018, it will be with a new District 20 state representative for the first time since Jimmy Carter was president and Corvettes were manufactured in St. Louis.

“I’m ready to move on,” Richards said, “but it’s been a fantastic experience.”

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