

WETHERINGTON FROM A1

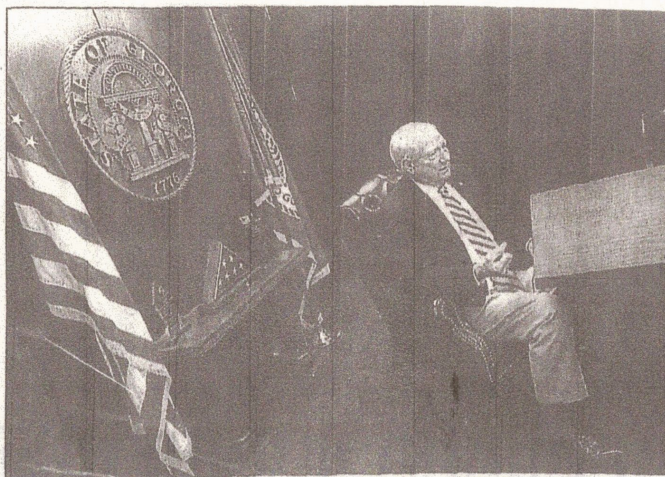
ernment, with this landfill issue and other issues that we were facing, so I felt the need to address them, and I did," Wetherington said Wednesday, looking back on his four years as mayor.

In four years, the finance department was fixed. The Walker lawsuit was settled. The library park lawsuit was resolved. In 2008 voters passed a sales tax to improve police pay and hire 100 more officers, expand the jail, and invest in crime prevention and public infrastructure — sewers, roads and bridges.

But other problems came to light. An audit showed administrators in the Parks and Recreation Department allegedly had used the city's tax-exempt status to mingle public and private funds in nonprofit accounts the finance department wasn't tracking.

The public learned that firefighter Zach Allen, son of Columbus Councilor Gary Allen and grandson of the late Mayor J.R. Allen, had tested positive for cocaine after driving a fire truck during an accident that led to an injured motorist's filing suit against the city. Zach Allen had resigned and faced no prosecution. Critics alleged a coverup. Later the fire department faced complaints of gender and racial discrimination.

Now 73, Wetherington's



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Columbus Mayor Jim Wetherington expounds on many issues that occurred during his time as mayor during a recent interview.

NOW 73, WETHERINGTON'S retiring from 50 years of public service dating back to 1957, when he was a military police officer.

retiring from 50 years of public service dating back to 1957, when he was a military police officer. He joined the Columbus Police Department in 1959, rose to the rank of chief in 1981, and retired in 1995. He since has served on the state parole board and as corrections commissioner.

On Jan. 3, Mayor-elect Teresa Tomlinson takes over. Wetherington said he and wife, Shirley, will work at managing about 50 apartments they have for rent, and do some traveling.

Last week he was asked about his time as Columbus' chief executive.

The highlights

What does he believe to be the greatest achievement?

"Probably the passage of this 1 cent sales tax to hire a 100 new police officers to make Columbus a safer city," he said. "I think making Columbus, Georgia, a safe place to live and raise a family has got to be a top priority. If you live in a city, and you're not safe in the city, you and your kids and your family, everything else goes downhill. When you're going to bring new industry into Columbus, I think folks look at how safe

is your city, and how progressive is it."

What's the second most notable achievement?

Bringing jobs here to mitigate the effects of a bad economy, he said: "You know, I've been the mayor when the economy went south, and it was tough to recruit new industry in because the economy was just so bad. We got NCR, and we got a number of smaller industries that I think are worthwhile mentioning. NCR is a big one, and of course now whitewater is right here on us in a year or so. That's going to be a giant in tourism for our city. The military,

the move that they've made coming into Fort Benning, BRAC — obviously I don't take credit for that because a lot of people worked on that before I ever came on the scene — but I think with the progress we've made here, Columbus is becoming a destination instead of a pass through."

How did he resolve the Walker lawsuit?

"I talked to the council: 'Let's try and settle this case.' They said that they'd like the case settled, too, if there was some way we could do it. So I went to Frank Martin, and I asked would he help me raise some private money to try and get this case settled so their (the Walkers') kid would have an opportunity to get a good education."

What was his view of the finance department fiasco?

"It was a first-class mess, and we thought that the first thing we needed to do was hire a first-class finance director," he said. "We offered the job to Pam Hodge, and she certainly has addressed all the issues that we asked her to address, and I think our finance department's in great shape. All the landfill issues have been settled."

How did David Rothschild get him involved in the library park lawsuit?

"He called me from his deathbed and said, 'Jim, you can bring this issue to fruition.' ... He told me 'I know you can.' And he said 'I'm asking you to get involved in it.'" So he got in touch with

school board Chairman Philip Schley to ask about settling the dispute."

How did he succeed where others so long had failed?

"I didn't try to push the issue. I called Dr. Schley and asked him for a meeting. ... I think he was ready to get this suit settled, and I know the city was. There was a wall built between the school district and the city of Columbus, and some folks said we weren't going to be able to settle this issue just talking. We were going to have to go to court. ...

"It just seemed like there was friction between the school board and the city. There were some members on the board and probably some members on the council, they had just put a line in the sand and said, 'We're not going to negotiate any further. It's going to be our way or no way.'"

He got around that impasse by talking directly with school superintendents, beginning with John Phillips and continuing with Susan Andrews. "I built a pretty good relationship with Dr. Phillips and it's continued on with Dr. Andrews," he said. "She has a tremendous amount of credibility, with the citizens. She's a very sophisticated and well-educated lady, but there's something about her that's down to earth. She's a good person, and that came out when we were talking about a tax to build new schools."

Andrews had a lot to do with getting a school sales tax passed in 2009, he said.