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NEWS

Rep. Donald McEachin dies Monday at 61; remembered as 'gentle giant' and 'valiant leader'



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WASHINGTON — Rep. Donald McEachin, a lawyer turned state legislator turned U.S. congressman who fought for issues ranging from the environment to the renaming of Fort Lee, died Monday night of complications from colorectal cancer just three weeks after being re-elected to a fourth term on Capitol Hill. He was 61.

McEachin's office announced his death in an email shortly after 10 p.m. Monday, saying the Fourth Congressional District "lost a hero who always, always fought for them and put them first." The statement did not indicate exactly when or where McEachin died.

"We are all devastated at the passing of our boss and friend, Congressman Donald McEachin," spokesperson Tara Rountree said in the email. "Valiantly, for years now, we have watched him fight and triumph over the secondary effects of his colorectal cancer from 2013. Tonight, he lost that battle, and the people of Virginia's Fourth Congressional District lost a hero who always, always fought for them and put them first."

Rountree said the office will remain open and continue to serve constituents "until a new representative is elected."

McEachin had battled a series of health issues over the years, most importantly the colorectal cancer. Always a tall and burly man, McEachin's weight loss as a result of his health was quite noticeable, but he did not let health setbacks stop him.

Tributes from colleagues began to pour in upon the news. U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, who shared a statewide Democratic ticket with McEachin and now-Sen. Mark Warner in 2001, said he met McEachin in 1985 "and we became fast friends."

"Our kids were the same age, we shared a statewide ticket with Mark Warner, and we've been together in the Virginia federal delegation for years," Kaine said in a statement released by his office. He called his friend "a gentle giant, a compassionate champion for underdogs, a climate warrior, a Christian example, an understanding dad, a proud husband, a loyal brother."

Warner, who won the Virginia governorship and eventually was elected to the U.S. Senate, also praised McEachin for his service and his friendship.

"Up until the very end, Don was a fighter," Warner said in a statement. "Even though he battled cancer and faced other trials in recent years, he never lost his focus on social and environmental justice. Tonight, Virginia has lost a great leader, and I have lost a great friend."

Petersburg officials released a statement late Tuesday afternoon saying they were "saddened" by McEachin's death, yet "confident that his legacy of support for underserved communities, civil rights, and environmental justice will live on."

"Petersburg has lost a champion and leader who always placed those needing the most help first," Petersburg Mayor Sam Parham said in the statement "Congressman McEachin's contributions to Petersburg will be remembered and will benefit the city for decades to come."

McEachin is the fourth Virginia congressional representative to die in office since 2000. The last was Republican Rep. Jo Ann Davis of Gloucester in the state's 1st District, who passed away of cancer in 2007 at the age of 57.

Rep. Herbert Bateman, a Republican from Newport News, died at 72 in 2000. The following year, Democratic Rep. Norman Sisisky, who like McEachin represented the Tri-City area on Capitol Hill, died of lung cancer at 71.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin is expected to announce soon a date for the special election to fill McEachin's term. That election could happen sometime next January.

In a tweet, Youngkin said it's "so sad" to hear of McEachin's death.

"A valiant fighter until the end, he admirably served Virginia and worked tirelessly to improve the lives of his constituents and Americans," Youngkin tweeted. "Suzanne and I are thinking of his family, friends and community during this difficult time."

Youngkin ordered flags to be flown at hall-staff through Wednesday evening in McEachin's memory.

The Virginia Democratic party called McEachin "a voice of reason."

"A person of faith, Donald embodied the definition of service. He had a kind and generous heart; and for so many people, he was a voice of reason, and a man who listened to you, always showing compassion and care," the party said in a statement Monday night. "He was wealthy in the only way that truly matters, with an abundance of friends and allies who loved and respected him. We could always count on him to give sound advice and guidance. His voice will be deeply missed."

Former Del. Rich Anderson, chairman of the Republican Party of Virginia, was a colleague of McEachin's when both were in the state Capitol.

"I served with then-State Senator McEachin in the General Assembly and know first-hand that he lived a life of service to our commonwealth," Anderson wrote in a statement. "Tonight, we honor his memory and lift up his family in prayer at this difficult time."

Re-elected earlier this month

McEachin's death comes 20 days after he defeated Republican Leon Benjamin in a rematch of the 2020 election. Benjamin, closely aligned with former President Donald Trump, never ceded the election to McEachin, repeating an unfounded Trump theme of rigged votes to favor Democrats.

Because of that, McEachin refused to debate Benjamin in the runup to this year's election. In an interview with The Progress-Index days before the Nov. 8 election, McEachin explained why he would not face off with him.

"My opponent is an election denier," McEachin said in that interview. "He makes facts up to engage his narrative."

Just as he did in 2020, McEachin defeated Benjamin with 61% of the vote Nov. 8 across the 4th District, which stretches from Richmond south to the state line.

McEachin went to Washington from years at the state Capitol in Richmond, where he served in both the House of Delegates and the state Senate. He was first elected to Congress in 2016 and subsequently re-elected in 2018 and 2020.

In Washington, McEachin was regarded as a loyal supporter of Capitol Hill Democrats who often lent his name to legislation involving environmental issues. But he also fought for federal funding for projects within the 4th District, and earlier this year, he was successful in getting \$3.3 million in Community Project Funding for two projects in Petersburg — \$2.4 million for improvements to the Poor Creek wastewater station in south Petersburg; and \$900,000 to replace diesel buses with electric ones in the Petersburg public school system.

This year, all 10 of the CPF requests on his wish list for the 4th District were included.

In one of the last statements issued by his office, on Nov. 17, McEachin praised outgoing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat, for her time at the podium. McEachin said he was "grateful" to Pelosi for helping him transition from Richmond to Washington.

"I thank Speaker Pelosi for her vision, fortitude, and commitment to the American people," the statement read. "It has been an honor to serve under her leadership and to help advance major legislative policies to improve the lives of Americans and strengthen our nation."

In her own statement Tuesday morning, Pelosi lauded McEachin's work on the House Select Committee on Climate Crisis and called him "a force for economic opportunity and environmental justice."

"He will be deeply missed by his colleagues, and he leaves behind a legacy that will improve the lives of all of our children for generations to come," Pelosi said.

Early life and politics

Born into a military family in Germany in 1961, Aston Donald McEachin attended St. Christopher's School in Richmond. In 1982, he graduated from American University in Washington, D.C. with a degree in political history. He got his law degree from the University of Virginia in 1986, and 12 years later, he earned a master's in divinity from Virginia Union University.

He co-founded the McEachin & Gee law firm in Richmond.

In 1995, McEachin won his first election to the House of Delegates from Richmond. While a delegate, McEachin was chosen as the Democratic candidate for attorney general in 2001 alongside Warner as governor and Kaine as lieutenant governor. He lost the November election to Republican Jerry Kilgore.

In 2007, McEachin eyed a move to the state Senate. In the Democratic primary that year, he defeated longtime incumbent Sen. Bennie Lambert, who drew criticism for supporting then-Sen. George Allen, a Republican, in his losing re-election bid to Democrat Jim Webb. He went on to win the state Senate seat with 81% of the vote — the same seat once held by Douglas Wilder who later became the first Black governor in Virginia and the first governor of color in the nation at the time.

Fort Lee's new name

However, it was McEachin's push to change the name of Fort Lee that likely cemented his political legacy in the area.

In 2020, Congress passed a defense authorization budget that called for the renaming of 10 Army posts throughout the South whose current names honored Confederate war heroes. Three of them were in Virginia, including Fort Lee in Prince George County.

Early in the discussions about new names, McEachin ardently pushed for Fort Lee to be renamed after retired Lt. Gen. Arthur Gregg, at one time the highest-ranked military officer of color in the United States. Gregg began his military career at the then-segregated Fort Lee and later was regarded as a leading expert in Army logistics, including the Quartermaster service so prominent at Fort Lee.

On May 24, the Defense Department's Naming Commission announced that Fort Lee would be named Fort Gregg-Adams in honor of Gregg and in memory of Charity Adams, the first Black woman in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and the commander of the first World War II battalion with Black women as its only members.

More: Fort Gregg-Adams: Military panel recommends renaming Fort Lee for trailblazing Black officers

In the interview days before the election, McEachin said he did not see the post renaming as a proud political accomplishment but rather a personal one. Gregg was a close friend of McEachin's father, and the congressman said he grew to love and admire Gregg as well.

"Gregg was a man I grew up with," McEachin said. "I don't know if I can rank it because it's so emotional to me."

Fort Gregg-Adams was not the only naming honor McEachin pushed for and obtained. He also got Congress to approve naming the U.S. Post Office branch in downtown Hopewell

McEachin's office said funeral arrangements will be announced "over the next few days." In the meantime, Rountree said the family "asks for privacy."

McEachin is survived by his wife, Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney Colette McEachin, their three children and a grandchild.

This story will be updated throughout the day as warranted. Check back often for details.

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