

Ron Rice, state senator from Newark who took on political bosses, to retire Aug. 31

BY MATT FRIEDMAN | 08/19/2022 01:03 PM EDT



Ron Rice's decision will trigger a special election in November to fill the remainder of his term in the solidly Democratic 28th Legislative District. | Julio Cortez/AP Photo

State Sen. Ronald Rice, a fiercely independent former Newark cop who has served in the upper house since 1986 and as chair of the Legislative Black Caucus for the past 18 years, will retire at the end of the month.

The 76-year-old Rice has been in poor health and has not attended recent Senate meetings in person. His wife, Shirley, died two years ago.

“It is with a full heart that I tender my resignation from the Senate effective August 31, 2022,” Rice, a Democrat, wrote in a letter to his Senate colleagues. “Despite the fervor of my commitment to the office and the depth of my dedication to my constituents and the people of New Jersey, circumstances beyond my control now force my retirement from this distinguished body.”

Rice penned a separate letter to members of the Legislative Black Caucus.

“Working with the New Jersey Legislative Black Caucus has been the most rewarding and meaningful endeavor of my professional life,” he wrote. “It has been the highest privilege and one that I’ve considered sacred — to sculpt our corner of America into something that more closely resembles ‘liberty and justice for all.’”

Rice’s decision will [trigger a special election](#) in November to fill the remainder of his term in the solidly Democratic 28th Legislative District. Democratic county committee members in the district will have to elect an interim senator to fill the seat until November.

InsiderNJ [first reported](#) Rice's retirement.

Rice, a U.S. Marine Corp. veteran from the Vietnam War and a former member of the Newark City Council, focused on racial and social justice issues throughout his career, was independent of the political machines that dominate politics in North Jersey and often tangled with Democratic power brokers. He was also an early backer of Gov. Phil Murphy’s campaign for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 2017, when most of the state’s Democratic establishment was lining up between then-Senate President Steve Sweeney and Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop.

“George Norcross still wants to control the world. I would hope that we have a governor who can govern,” [Rice said at the time](#), referring to the South Jersey power broker and Sweeney’s political patron.

Rice was also often critical of Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo and Sen. [Cory Booker](#) (D-N.J.), against whom he unsuccessfully ran for Newark mayor in 2006.

One of the longest serving members of the state Senate, Rice was a proponent of cannabis decriminalization but fought the effort to legalize it, arguing the legislation was aimed more at helping corporations make money than of repairing the damage the drug war wrought on inner-city communities. That led to an intense shouting match with state Sen. Nicholas Scutari (D-Union), now the Senate president, during a remote voting session in December 2020, when the Senate passed a cannabis legalization bill.

“I’m not going to be held hostage anymore because of another senator,” Rice told Scutari.

Rice was also the biggest champion of a successful effort to restore voting rights to people with criminal convictions who are on probation or parole, though he did not realize his hopes to also restore voting rights to current inmates.

Rice did face some controversy over his opposition to same-sex marriage, and in 2013 called homosexuality a “fad” that some people “do grow out of.”

Although Rice repeatedly voted against same-sex marriage prior to a court decision that allowed it in New Jersey, he joined most senators to support a 2020 bill that formally recognized same-sex marriage in state law.

“I know you will continue onward, ever vigilant for opportunities to make New Jersey a more equitable place to live, work, study and visit,” Rice wrote to members of the Legislative Black Caucus. “I’m sure your focus will always be on those who suffer most.”