McHugh reflects on 12 years as mayor of Baton Rouge

By DANNY HETMAN

A

fter 33 years as Baton Rouge Mayor Tom Ed McHugh's secretary, Doris Flowers is looking forward to slowing down a bit. When McHugh ends 12 years of the helm of city-parish government on Tuesday, Flowers will leave with him. Flowers, who marked her 70th birthday this year, has finally decided she's old enough to retire.

But Flowers was still fielding phone calls and juggling the mayor's schedule when a reporter visited his office recently to reminisce about McHugh's tenure.

"It's slowing down a little," said Flowers, referring to the inevitable ebb in activity when a lame-duck mayor winds up his term. Even so, there's been the matter of handling McHugh's swan song appearances across the community.

"They still want him," Flowers said. "It's going on in a few days, so I've been calling and canceling some appointments. They criticize me because they think I schedule him too much. They told me I was killing him all these years. But he'll see anybody."

Like all public figures, the departing McHugh also faces a mountain of mail each day, some of it decidedly odd.

"I just got a strange letter from a guy in England," said McHugh, sitting on his couch and facing walls where pictures were being removed from their hooks. "This man who wrote the letter wanted my autograph. And he wants to schedule a flight for me in England. I think he thinks I'm some kind of beat. I must be my nose."

McHugh's broad nose has taken its share of jokes. When he had sinus surgery a few years ago, the mayor's doctor offered to throw in some cosmetic alteration, too.

"He said, 'I can really do something with that nose,'" McHugh recalled. "I said, 'Look, I'm not here to look."

Tom Ed McHugh points to a district boundary line during his days as a school administrator in this 1977 photo. As director of transportation for the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board, McHugh oversaw the system's school bus routes.
LEFT: Betty and Tom Ed McHugh meet with supporters after he was elected to his first term as mayor in 1968. McHugh was re-elected for two more terms.

BELOW: Mayor Tom Ed McHugh rolls out the first ball to open an international bowling convention in Batton Rouge in 1983. "They criticize me because they think I schedule them too much," said McHugh's secretary, Doris Flowers. "But I'll see anybody."

"I felt like a political giant," said McHugh. "I was...showing at the polls, fellow commissioners were stepping on my shoes."

Among other items, the commission was forced to grow to 15 members, increasing the mayor's power. Zachary's mayors became incapacitated. McHugh's successors feeling beyond the issue, concluding that the prospect for success of the mayor was extremely remote.

Ironically, the line was barely dry on the mayor's watch when large numbers suffered an ultimately fatal brain tumor and was forced to take a leave of absence from his post.

I pressed to show you that you have to prepare for the unexpected," McHugh said. "It meant my second term in local government.

In 1968, he began the first of two terms on the Zachary City Council, representing his home base in the Zachary. For his first term of 3 years, 1965, he expanded the city's parks. In the second, he campaigned through the entire city, including the eastern areas of the city, becoming a popular mayor of the city.

"I was asked about the role of mayor from time to time," McHugh said. "I was asked about the role of mayor from time to time."

As a three-term mayor, McHugh faced challenges that ranged from city neighborhoods to native Batton Rouge residents to the northern part of the city.

"In my terms, the mayor has seen such varied parts together," McHugh said. "In my terms, the mayor has seen such varied parts together."