

Beatty often started hearings late and limited most to three or four hours per day.

Still, Gray said Beatty appeared visibly weaker last week at the latest Delta hearing.

Beatty became known as much for colorful ruminations as for rulings. Her periodic digressions — which sometimes combined her own travel experiences with advice on how to run a better airline — both frustrated and amused lawyers and other parties.

Late last year, the lawyer for Delta's pilots union asked Beatty to recuse herself from a contract hearing, charging a prior comment about pilots' "hideously high" pay showed bias.

However, Delta's lawyers later became frustrated with Beatty as well as she questioned some of the airline's arguments for needing pay cuts. At one point she loudly told a company lawyer to "shut up, please."

Kathleen Farrell-Willoughby, a court clerk, said Hardin was working with Beatty's staff Monday, but she didn't know how pending hearings would be rescheduled, including a hearing set for Jan. 19.

Former clerk Josephine Yang-Patyi described Hardin as a gentlemanly, by-the-book judge.

"He is all about getting things done in the most efficient way possible and the fastest way," she said Monday. Hence, court sessions could stretch late into the night.

"He doesn't like delays. He doesn't like excuses," Yang-Patyi said, adding later: "There are litigants who just buy time. He doesn't like that."

Hardin is a distant relative of the late Adlai Stevenson, a twice-failed presidential candidate in the 1950s. His father, Adlai Stevenson Hardin, was an ad executive who became a full-time sculptor.

Hardin spent much of his career at the prominent firm Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy before moving to the bench about 10 years ago. A graduate of Columbia's law school, he joined the firm after a short stint on active duty in the Army, then did a range of commercial litigation, including antitrust and bankruptcy cases.

As a judge, one of his biggest cases was a bankruptcy filing by NextWave Telecom, a company licensed to provide wireless service in New York City and other areas.

He moved to stop the Federal Communications Commission from revoking NextWave's licenses, an issue that eventually was ruled on by the U.S. Supreme Court, which decided the FCC had overstepped its authority.

Hardin sought and listened to the opinions of his clerks and interns, according to both Yang-Patyi and Jonathan Koevary, a former intern who is now a bankruptcy attorney in New York.

"He is a very intellectual guy, a very fair guy," Koevary said. "He let's everybody speak."

Jim Gray, chairman of a retired pilots group, fears the midstream switch could disrupt the case.

"I don't know how you bring somebody in and bring them up to speed on a case of this magnitude," he said.

"Now it's like starting over on a lot of things."

He said Beatty, 63, has "gotten a lot done" despite health problems that limited her schedule.

Delta judge goes on leave

Replacement might finish case

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Barely four months into its bankruptcy case, Delta Air Lines has a new judge to deal with — at least temporarily.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Prudence Carter Beatty — known for lending equal dollops of humor and sarcasm to the airline's Chapter 11 proceedings so far — has stepped aside for medical reasons, according to the federal bankruptcy court in New York. She was slowed by sciatica and two knee replacements.

She'll be replaced by Judge Adlai S. Hardin Jr., 68, who a former clerk described as a "very no-nonsense kind of guy" who runs an efficient courtroom.

Beatty's leave initially will be for two months, according to court officials, but Delta's case could stay with Hardin even after Beatty's leave ends if he handles several issues during her absence.

"We anticipate a seamless transition," said Delta spokesman Anthony Black.

Lawyers and other people involved with the case said the change will likely slow proceedings initially. But they added that it shouldn't be disruptive over the long run because a bankruptcy case involves numerous discrete issues and hearings rather than a long, complicated trial.

"I don't anticipate that it will result in significant delays," said Atlanta attorney Darryl Laddin, who has appeared before Beatty many times but few times before Hardin.

"It can be difficult for a judge to step into the middle of a case, but it's done," he said. Laddin predicted Hardin, who is also taking on another of Beatty's cases, will "get up to speed quickly" and may be able to spend longer days in court than Beatty.

Beatty's key rulings so far have involved retiree and pilot issues, but the judge in a large case like Delta's also referees dozens of claims involving aircraft leases and other creditors. Ultimately, the judge must approve a plan of reorganization for Delta to emerge from Chapter 11. The airline filed for Chapter 11 protection in the Manhattan court on Sept. 14.