

Mitchem: Statesman to the end -3-13-10 Albertville, AL

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Mitchem: Statesman to the end

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"I've always been able to get the Republicans' vote in Marshall County," the Union Grove Democrat said. "I'd had to work real hard, but I think I could've won.

"The reason I think that, even though this is the most Republican district held by a Democrat, is there are several issues in Huntsville about the housing authority over there.

"The City of Huntsville has got some members that are very independent, and they've been going into that Jones Valley-Grissom High School area, that expensive neighborhood out there, and been putting some low-grade marginal apartments on the fringe.

"It's starting to lower the value of those real expensive homes that people live in. I could've made that an issue because I would've looked out for those people in Jones Valley and made sure this board didn't run over them and put these low-rent housing projects in their neighborhoods."

Party affiliation

Mitchem said he never seriously considered changing parties during his 36-year tenure in the Legislature, including 32 as a senator.

"My philosophy is about as much Republican as it is Democrat, but I felt like it would diminish what I have accomplished just to switch parties to try to get elected," he said. "If I switched parties because of philosophy, it might've been different, but just to switch parties to say, 'I can get elected as a Republican and I can't get elected as a Democrat' ... I wouldn't do that."

Mitchem, 72, said his health is OK considering he survived a heart attack years ago.

"I had an artery that was partly closed," he said. "I never did do surgery, but I went back about three weeks ago, and the doctor said you don't need to run again. It's just too much stress on your heart to run again."

But doctors had offered him the same advice before and he continued to run, he said.

Advice for his successor

Mitchem said he does not plan to endorse anyone running for his seat, which right now is four Republicans, including two from Albertville, Tony Cochran and Don Spurlin.

"I wish the four or five running for the Senate the best of luck," he said. "Whichever one wins will be very fortunate to have a wonderful area to represent."

Whoever wins will have to work hard to even come close to filling the experience gap. Mitchem is one of the most powerful senators in the Legislature, a former president pro tempore who managed to bring numerous dollars and projects to the Ninth District. Mitchem's decision not to run again comes after

veteran Democratic Rep. Frank McDaniel's announcement to retire in December.

"The senators and representatives coming in are going to have to build some inroads," Mitchem said. "I've been in there since 1974 when I was elected to the House, and I've only been out for six months when I ran for lieutenant governor, then came back to the Senate."

"Seniority and being able to know where the people are who control the finances are important. I'd advise the next ones coming in to go down there, listen and work hard, get involved, and try their best to get on the best committees."

Mitchem said he thinks the 35-member Senate will remain divided.

"I think it's going to be another 18-17 vote, and with close votes like that it's hard to govern," he said. "The Republicans are working hard. They've got the money."

"I'm going to stay a Democrat. I really believe the Democrats have come around. The Alabama Democrat philosophy is not quite as liberal as it has been in the past."

Power brokers in the Senate

With Mitchem leaving, one of the Senate's chief power brokers goes with him. He said Lowell Barron and Roger Bedford are among the key players in the Senate.

"No. 1 is Lowell," Mitchem said. "He's chairman of the Rules Committee and they control everything."

"A guy a lot of people criticize, but he's one of the smartest politicians that I've ever known and works as hard for his district as anyone I've ever known, is Roger Bedford. He's a good person. His word has been good to me. He and I and Lowell's relationship is almost like the three amigos."

Mitchem also does not think special interests unduly influence Montgomery as much as the media reports.

"I don't think it's as bad as the press sometimes wants it to be," he said. "I don't know of any time they ever really changed my vote."

Experience

During an exclusive interview Monday with The Reporter, Mitchem told a number of stories during his days in Montgomery, providing insight to how state government works.

The stories illustrated the importance of experience. Mitchem, who chairs the Confirmations Committee, described how he negotiated money for improvements at Albertville Regional Airport.

"I was on a committee that set the budgets last year, and the governor wanted some things in the budget," Mitchem said. "He told me he'd give me half a million dollars to put out at Albertville airport. I told him we had a training school and a lot of stuff going on out there. Well, I never could get my money."

"I'm chairman of confirmations. That's the only leverage I got. I had 139 confirmations in my committee, and I never would meet and confirm the governor's appointments. They sent the chief of staff upstairs there to see me, and he said the governor wants to know when are you going to get all his appointments."

"I said, 'You go tell the governor I'll get those appointments when he gets me that money for the airport in Albertville. About two weeks later, they call and tell me the money's there.'"

Five governors

Mitchem has served during the administrations of five governors.

"I've been fortunate to be in position to have good relationships with the governors over the years," he said.

Who is the best?

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"Probably Guy Hunt. He was down-to-earth, easy to talk to. His word was good. He was just a country boy, but he had some brilliant people surrounding him," he said.

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Mitchem is a politician but also a statesman, so when The Reporter asks him who the worst governor is, the longtime legislator just smiles and replies in that Georgia drawl of his, "Can I go off the record?"
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