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Mitchem's legacy

Senator proudest of TVA bill, Cathedral Caverns

Alabama Sen. Hinton Mitchem's legacy will extend long beyond his final day in office because of his single-minded philosophy.

"I went down there to do everything I could do to get money for my district, and that's what I did," he said during an exclusive interview Monday with The Reporter.

Mitchem cited a Tennessee Valley Authority in-lieu-of-taxes bill and the resurrection of Cathedral Caverns as two of his proudest — and most important — accomplishments.

Mitchem, who announced his decision Monday not to seek re-election in 2010, was the leader of a strong Democratic Marshall County Legislative Delegation, which includes another retiring veteran lawmaker, Rep. Frank McDaniel.

Mitchem, 72, praised his cohorts.

"I appreciate the outstanding working relationship that our county legislative delegation has had," the Union Grove legislator said. "Over the years, the delegation has always worked well together, with a common sense of purpose, and I think that has been an asset to our citizens.

"It has been a great example of teamwork, and I have especially enjoyed the long relationship of serving with Representative Frank McDaniel and Representative Jeff McLaughlin. That's one thing about it. Ol' Frank, Jeff and I ... we could get the money for the district. We were able to work together and knew how to put it in the budget.

"I also want to say how much I appreciate the dedication and hard work of Judy Miller, director of the Marshall County Legislative Office. The support she provides to legislators is an invaluable asset in helping serve the constituents. That legislative office is almost like a congressional office. Nobody in Alabama can do what Judy does."

Mitchem's 32-year tenure as senator earned the respect of the Albertville Republicans running to fill his District 9 seat: Tony Cochran and Don Spurlin.

"Hinton Mitchem's retirement signals the end of an era in the Alabama Senate," Cochran said. "While he and I did not always agree on the issues, I consider Hinton a friend. I speak for many people when I say 'thank you' for Hinton's many years of service to District 9 and the State of Alabama. Wendi, my two daughters, and I wish him well."

Spurlin said, "Regardless of political party or philosophy, each of us owes Hinton Mitchem a debt of gratitude for his decades of service to the citizens of Senate District 9. Each of his fellow Senate members, including those across the aisle, have the deepest respect and the highest regard for him, and given the many battles that have been fought in the upper chamber, there is no higher tribute than that."

Accomplishments

A staunch supporter of education, business and law enforcement, Mitchem was the sponsor of laws to protect children from sexual predators and women from stalking and domestic violence.

During his career, Mitchem championed programs and services for retirees and elderly citizens. He was honored for making significant contributions toward enhancing the lives of elderly citizens by being inducted into the Alabama Senior Citizens Hall of Fame in 2006.

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In 2000, Mitchem led passage of a constitutional amendment, the Sanctity of Marriage Act, defining marriage as being between a man and a woman. Eighty-six percent of voters in Marshall County and 81 percent statewide overwhelmingly ratified it.

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Mitchem is a longtime supporter of education and recognized the need to establish a chancellor to oversee the state's junior colleges and technical schools. He sponsored a 1982 bill key to the growth and development of the state's two-year college system.

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"Community colleges have made it more affordable for many people to continue their education beyond high school," he said.

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In 1980, Mitchem sponsored the bill creating the Alabama Housing Finance Authority. AHFA has since sold more than \$ 2.5 billion in bonds, which have provided low-interest loans for single-family dwellings to more than 185,000 Alabama families, Mitchem said.

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Also in 1980, Mitchem was appointed chairman of the Alabama Commission on Physical Fitness, a position he held for 28 years. He served 18 consecutive years as chairman of the Alabama Special Olympics and two terms as chairman of the Senate Confirmations Committee.

'Lasting legacy'

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Mitchem took the lead in passing the Tennessee Valley Authority in-lieu-of-taxes bill, taking the money TVA paid to the state and returning it to the counties where TVA is located. Since 1983, it has meant more than \$ 50 million dollars to schools and local governments in his district, Mitchem said. Mitchem called it "the single most important piece of legislation for his district to come out of his service in the Legislature."

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Mitchem has served on the Joint Legislative Committee on State Parks since its inception, serving as chairman three times. He sponsored the State Parks Bond issue passed in 1998 at a time the state parks were deteriorating badly. The \$110 million bond issue was responsible for the \$26 million renovation at Lake Guntersville State Park as well as other improvements to parks across the state.

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Perhaps Mitchem's proudest accomplishment was getting the money in the general fund budget in 1987 for the state to purchase Cathedral Caverns in nearby Woodville. He said many critics in the Legislature accused him of throwing money in a "hole in the ground."

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"Preserving that magnificent natural resource and putting it under the state park system is a lasting legacy," he said. "Cathedral Caverns was locked up and closed. It was vandalized, barricaded and gone. I put, I think it was \$700,000, in the budget and wrote it in to go up there.

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"The conservation department, we talked them into buying Cathedral Caverns, and now Cathedral Caverns is a permanent park. A lot of people from out of state come look at it.

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"It was destroyed and gone, and since I got the money to put it under the parks system, it'll be there for my children and your grandchildren. It'll be there forever."

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Mitchem's political career winds down in the midst of "the worst economy" he said he's experienced during his legislative tenure.

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"People are afraid to even buy now," he said. "Most of them don't have the money or they're out of jobs. It's tough times, and I don't think we're going to get out of it till at least another year."

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Still, Mitchem is optimistic about the future of Sand Mountain, especially the activity at Albertville Regional Airport.

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"I think if you and I could come back here 10 or 12 years from now, I think it'll be unbelievable what you'll see out at that airport," he said. "You've got some good people here in Albertville in office and on the airport board. I think that'll be one of the best things that's ever happened to Albertville. In the next 5 to 10 years, I think there's going to be tremendous growth."
