



'A balancing act'

Retiring community leader urges county to keep 'at-large' perspective



Retiring Beaufort County Community Services Director Morris Campbell is photographed in his office Wednesday as he reminisces about his many years of serving the county. **JAY KARR • Staff photo**

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Almost 35 years ago, community leader Morris Campbell entered public service in his first successful run to join Beaufort County Council as an "at-large" representative.

As one of three countywide members on the council at that time, the Hilton Head Island native was beholden to no specific geographic district in the growing county and had to represent all of its increasingly diverse towns and residents.

"That often meant it was a balancing act, but my job was to represent those least among us," he said. "Because I thought that was the important thing as far as keeping this train moving in the right direction. That means an inclusive system."

Now 65, Campbell is retiring as the county's longtime community services director. In that position, he worked to build an inclusive system to try to support those who wouldn't otherwise have access to local government.

More than ever, he says, residents and community leaders need to take that "at-large" approach to tackling local issues and caring for those who need it most.

On Wednesday, Campbell sat down with The Island Packet and The Beaufort Gazette to discuss what he's seen change, what's stayed the same and what the future has in store for Beaufort County.

MORE ONLINE

• For video of longtime friends and colleagues Bill McBride and Fred Washington reflecting on Morris Campbell's years as a public servant, go to <http://bit.ly/1KcB67O>.

• For video of the interview with retiring Beaufort County Community Services Director Morris Campbell, go to <http://bit.ly/1gflc6W>.

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Here are some highlights from that conversation:

'A HOLISTIC APPROACH'

"If I was to point to one thing that I'm very proud of, I'm very proud of that Human Services Alliance coming together," Campbell said.

In the mid-1990s, Campbell helped create the Human Services Coordinating Council, which later became the Alliance for Human Services. The alliance has brought together dozens of local nonprofits, faith organizations, businesses and county departments to partner and pool resources to tackle local issues.

The alliance's nine coalitions work on everything from health care to housing. They also collaborate with the Together For Beaufort County initiative to collect data on and study those issues.

"All of those were things we thought were starting to fall through the cracks," Campbell said. "The county was growing so fast that there was no way I could address it from my position without the help from all of those organizations that were trying to piecemeal and address issues."

"That's when the whole emphasis became let's coordinate, let's collaborate and let's communicate what we're doing. ... That's been the beauty of the alliance; it's taking a holistic approach now."

Built to survive long past his own tenure with the county, Campbell hopes the alliance and its work for those "least among us" will be a major part of his legacy.

"The whole purpose was that they don't need a Morris Campbell to advocate anymore, because we have so many Morris

"You can actually see the dynamics of what's happening in the county. It's changing now, and it's changed so much in the last 40 years, it's mind-boggling."

Morris Campbell, retiring community leader

Campbells in that alliance now who understand that the whole picture, the whole quilt, is woven by them," Campbell said. "They can keep it going."

THE CHANGE CHALLENGE

In 1980, when Campbell first ran for the council, the county had a population of about 60,000. Today, the county is home to more than 170,000.

"You can actually see the dynamics of what's happening in the county," Campbell said. "It's changing now, and it's changed so much in the last 40 years, it's mind-boggling."

That change has transformed two-lane roads into full-fledged highways and flipped the county power and political dynamics to the south side of the Broad River, he said. It's also come with rapid demographic shifts that fundamentally changed the Lowcountry and continue today, especially with the growing Hispanic population.

On the tails of those changes came important issues that Campbell and the alliance hoped to address, especially how to provide affordable housing, improve public education and create jobs.

In 2015, those priorities haven't changed, he said.

Education has improved, and work is underway to provide more affordable housing, but there is still more work to be done to mend "that whole social fabric I'm talking about," he added.

"There are better mousetraps out there that we need to experiment with," Campbell said of the changing tools of govern-

ment. "The challenge is: Are we willing to do it? Are we willing to make changes or adapt to the changes taking place?"

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

There's one thing that still nags Campbell, looking back on his career: Daufuskie Island.

For years, Campbell has tried to help coordinate a frequent, reliable and accessible public ferry to and from the island, but it's become the big-ticket item he can't scratch off his list.

"I'll probably write a book on it, 'How not to get yourself tied up in a darn ferry system,'" Campbell joked.

For a time, the county partnered with developers on the island to shuttle residents and visitors. But when the economic downturn collapsed those changes, "it was a whole different ball game at that point," Campbell said.

The county is now back to the drawing board, while island residents have banded together this year to try to make their voices heard through the Daufuskie Island Council.

Among the papers and records being shuffled around Campbell's office last week were two boxes filled with years' worth of ferry tickets saved from riders. Campbell has kept the boxes as a prop for every time he makes a pitch about the ferry service to illustrate how many people on the island rely on the county's help, he said.

"Just look at those boxes," Campbell said. "The folks on Daufuskie really need that ferry service. ... If Daufuskie and the state and the county commit to

it, in a comprehensive app we can solve that transpo problem."

'BE A MAN OF YOUR WORD'

Campbell also won't even get his first job.

When Sea Pines was just beginning in the 1960s, he came and tried to help out around neighborhood.

One afternoon, an over-teenage Campbell met a neighbor on Beach Lagoon Drive and came to clean his yard and pull weeds. But the house wasn't finished yet, so its owner told Campbell to return a few months later.

When Campbell did, the neighbor lauded him for his commitment and hired him as a handyman around the yard for every Saturday. This continued even when the family was out of town, until Campbell left college.

"I developed that trust," Campbell said. "When I graduated from college, they gave me a gift and sent me a note saying, 'Keep up the good work and be a man of your word.' That stuck with me."

"Honesty will take you a long way. Those are lessons I've learned. When I started getting involved in community service, I thought the same thing."

Decades later, it's still what Campbell preaches. He believes in it because he's shown it works. He hopes the next generation of community leaders don't forget it.

"I've really enjoyed a career in public service," Campbell said. "It's just a good feeling you get when you're able to answer the phone and say, 'I can help with that.'"

"It's not the big things that are the headlines. ... It's the little things that make a big difference."

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