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Curwood Chappell leaves York County Council with loyal following, some friction

BY JIE JENNY ZOU

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ROCK HILL — For the last 22 years, Curwood Chappell has been a fixture of York County Council meetings — opining on the importance of minimalist government and the dangers of socialism and maintaining what he calls “peace in the valley” — a platform that has garnered him a loyal following but also caused some friction.

The longtime councilman of District 5 had been tight-lipped about his plans for this upcoming election, but he officially declined to run when the filing period with the state Election Commission closed at noon Sunday.

Chappell, a former veterinarian, has served 11 consecutive council terms since 1992.

“I’m not a politician, I’m a public servant,” said Chappell, 84, who said he wasn’t going to formally endorse any candidate. He will hold a news conference near his southern York County farm Tuesday morning.

Fellow councilman Bump Roddey said he was “shocked” Chappell hadn’t filed for re-election, but he said that whoever Chappell chooses to support in the race will have a distinct advantage.

Fort Mill building inspector Marty Taylor and Rock Hill lawyer Christi Cox will square off in the Republican primary in June for the seat, which includes both Rock Hill and Fort Mill. Cox has said she is a longtime supporter and close friend of Chappell and the Chappell family.

Chappell’s promise to be “the voice of the people” has won him a loyal base of voters that have overwhelmingly supported him against several challengers over the years.

“He’s been fighting for his district,” said Jay Craig, 60. “You can be assured he will do the right thing for the people.”

Craig likened Chappell to another longtime politician, Herb Kirsh of Clover, who died in January and was South Carolina’s longest serving state representative before he was unseated by York’s Tommy Pope in 2010. Craig called both Chappell and Kirsh “two people you could really count on.”

Craig owns Hi Cotton Convenience off S.C. 324 — a gas station and store near his family’s farm.



FILE. York County Councilman Curwood Chappell presented Natalie Savant, 9, of San Antonio, Texas, with a check at Strikers in Rock Hill last summer. Natalie was attempting to bowl in all fifty states and raise money for scholarship programs. Strikers was her 22nd stop on her national tour.

STEPHANIE MARKS MARTELL

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The business owner said he's gone to Chappell for zoning-related issues and veterinarian services.

Chappell also made an impression on Casey Seay, 22, who just moved into the district in November. He said he wishes the incumbent would seek re-election. Seay said he's met Chappell twice in the short time he's lived just a few minutes' drive from the councilman.

"He's not somebody who's going to say something and do something else," said Seay. "He's true to his word."

But Chappell's direct nature also has been a source of discomfort for some.

Former York County County Manager Jim Baker said he probably spent more time with Chappell during his five years with the county than with any other council member, including council chairmen. Baker said his mornings often started with a long phone call from Chappell on the status of the county and thoughts on improvements and ordinances.

"Curwood's one of those folks that I think a lot people have a love-hate relationship with," said Baker, who left the county in early 2013 to take a city manager position in Chesapeake Bay, Va. "We went through periods where we were best friends and periods where he did not speak to me." But, Baker noted, "you always know where you are with him."

Baker described Chappell as an "enthraling" storyteller with vast historical knowledge who's "hard not to like," but also as an opinionated politician who could become "unpleasant."

The two often butted heads when it came to defining Baker's role. "In York County, the system is designed to be a strong county manager system, but that's not what Curwood wanted," Baker said, adding that Chappell once said he wanted Baker fired because of his influence on council.

Council chairman Britt Blackwell called Chappell the "epitome of a public servant" who has a "unique way of expressing concerns." Blackwell said former U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond was among several statewide politicians who took a liking to Chappell and his stance on no-frills government.

"Curwood is his own man," Blackwell said. "After many years, he's ready to let someone else take the lead."

Roddey said that while he and Chappell haven't always agreed on issues and were sometimes on opposite ends of the spectrum, he is still honored to serve and sit next to the longtime councilman.

"He really had his constituency at heart every time he voted, and that's hard to say about someone who's served as long as he served," said Roddey, whose district includes Rock Hill.

Chappell has continued to capture District 5 despite major redistricting over the past few years – changing from a historically rural district made up of farmland to include the booming Fort Mill area.

"He's been able to pick up even more supporters, even in a changing district," Roddey said.

Taylor called Chappell's council service "commendable" but said he doesn't "think it'll be the last we'll see from Mr. Chappell."

Baker expressed similar predictions that Chappell would continue to play an active role in politics regardless of whether he has a political seat.

"The last thing Curwood would ever do is back away from a fight."

Jie Jenny Zou • 803-329-4062




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Curwood tells it like it is. When I mentioned to him that when I or any other average citizen appeared before county council, council members leaned back in their chairs, crossed their arms, and seemed to wish they could throw their feet up on the desks, not interested whatsoever in what was being presented. But... when a member of a prominent Rock Hill family addressed the council, every member leaned forward, elbows on the desks, eagerly listening to man's request for additional money for his group because it was running short on it's annual allotted funds. Not only was the request approved, he was asked if he was sure he was asking for enough. Curwood replied, Plyer, when you start making donations to our election campaigns, then we will start listening to you. Sobering but true.

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