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## Parks Helms: 'I'm going to miss the give-and-take'

Commissioner reflects on three decades as public official

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Parks Helms did not run for elected office for the first time in decades, ending 16 years on the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners. He was first elected to the board in 1992 and served as chairman during five of his seven terms. L.MUELLER – lmueller@charlotteobserver.com

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In all, four veteran Mecklenburg commissioners are leaving office this month. Here is what they say about their time in office and their future plans:

Norman Mitchell

**Best thing about serving:** “Just a host of things,” including selection of new sheriff and Department of Social Services director, completion of studies on seniors and veterans, and pushing for completion of recreation center on West Boulevard.

**What will you miss the most:** “The involvement with the people here in Mecklenburg County, being able to work to solve some of the solutions to make life better. Also serving on a federal homeland security task force and the N.C. local government retirement system which oversaw the pension funds.”

**What are your plans?** “A lot of people ask that question. I ask them, ‘Did you know me before I was a commissioner?’ I was a stay-at-home dad, served on commissions and committees and I played golf. Now the kids are grown, I will continue to serve on committees and commission, and I will play more golf.” He was recently appointed by state House Speaker Joe Hackney to serve on the state's human relations commission.

Dan Ramirez

**Best thing about serving:** “The best thing for me has been that I was able to give back a little bit to my community the one that I lived in for almost all my life. And it was rewarding.”

**What will you miss the most:** “Being able to do something meaningful for the community even though they may be small pieces and bits of things. I think that it is something that I really wanted to do and was able to do and was allowed to do so. I don't have any regrets. I think I did whatever I could the best I could.”

**What are your plans?** “Relax and really try to pay more attention to my business and my family.”

Dan Bishop was not immediately available for comment.

## Poll

How would you rate Parks Helms' public service?

- An excellent record.
- Some flaws, but a job well done.
- Overall, a negative for county.

Today, a university archivist will start sifting through reams of materials that document Parks Helms' 16 years as a Mecklenburg County commissioner.

Helms, a Democrat, has spent more than three decades in public office, including his stint as commissioner and 10 years as a member of the N.C. House. He also ran unsuccessfully for lieutenant governor and the state Senate.

Helms is one of four commissioners taking part in their last meeting tonight. Also leaving are two-term at-large commissioner Dan Ramirez, longtime District 2 representative Norman Mitchell and four-year District 5 commissioner Dan Bishop.

While on the county board, Helms pushed for more spending for social programs and education. He also lists pushing for a new courthouse and advocating for consolidation between the city and county governments among his top accomplishments.

The Observer interviewed Helms at his law office on Monday. Comments have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q. Has it been an adventure?

This has been a wonderful experience for me. It is a great adventure, it has been a great adventure. It has been a part of my life that I will miss and that's one of the difficult things that I'm struggling with now, is what do I do next.

Q. Why be a county commissioner?

The county commission is in the human service business and that's why it is so important that the men and women who are elected to that office have an understanding about what that role is and how the county commission is so important to the quality of life that people have, particularly to those who need support from social services or who need mental health or who need what we do through public education and providing support for the state's largest public school system.

Q. (Helms was ousted from his chairmanship post in 1997 by four Republicans and one Democrat after contentious votes on issues such as arts funding.) What did you learn from that?

Yes, it bothered me a little bit. But at the same time, I wouldn't have done anything differently. What I realized is there were times when I got too far out front ... To be a leader you need to lead, but you don't get so too far out front that you lose your following. ... Politics is, in fact, a game and you have to sometimes be on the offensive and sometimes on the defensive and I like to play offense.”

Q. Has there been one single moment that has stood out?

I do hope that I have brought to the board and to this community a style of leadership that creates confidence in the

role that government plays in people's lives. It is not necessary that people always agree with what you do. I hear this a lot, 'I didn't agree with you but I like the way you did it.' ... Bill James and I are constantly differing with each other but ... there's no animosity there. And I'm gonna miss Bill. I'm going to miss the give-and-take that we had at our comings and goings and he knows it.

Q. What are your plans for the future?

At every instant in my life where it came to a changing point or a turning point, something has appeared. I think about the Prophet Isaiah that says "wait on the lord" and he will direct your paths and just depend on him and you can walk and not think. ... Whatever the future holds remains to be seen; I hope it will be something that will give me an opportunity to use the experience that I've had and the energy and the influence that I may have.

### IN HIS WORDS

**A lingering struggle:** We still have too much poverty that we have not eliminated or even alleviated, and I think that continues to be one of the most difficult challenges facing local governments across the country in particular here. It affects our school system. It affects everything we do. It affects the business community. It affects the health system. All of those are in some way or another related to poverty.

### Another regret:

I'm sorry we don't have AAA baseball in uptown. I hope that we ultimately will and had it not been for the Jerry Reese lawsuits I think that we would be further along. I still think that it will come to pass. ... This has really been one of the most frustrating initiatives that I have ever had to deal with.

### On sponsoring a 1978 state bill on liquor-by-the-drink:

That piece of legislation literally reshaped this community because you would never have the restaurants, you would never have the headquarters offices here, the banks wouldn't be like they are.

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Give and Take? HAH! More like Take and Take and Take and Take...

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