



## AWARD FOR DISTINGUISHED PUBLIC SERVICE

# MITCH GILLESPIE

Mitch Gillespie has wanted to run for political office since he was 10 years old.

“Back then, my childhood buddies and I played a Parker Brothers game called Landslide,” says Gillespie. Landslide is a board game that simulates American presidential elections. Players collect cards representative of Electoral College votes and the player that reaches 270 votes becomes President and wins the game. “I could tell you at age 10 how many electoral votes every state had, and which states it took to win a presidential election,” Gillespie says.

Gillespie grew up in a cotton-mill village in Western North Carolina and moved to Raleigh at the age of 18. “The only thing I could afford was to go to Wake Tech, so I moved to Raleigh. I paid my way through school, paid my own rent, worked while I was there, and borrowed money through the College Foundation,” he reflects.

He graduated with an associate degree in civil engineering and moved back home to take a surveying job. While working, Gillespie says he noticed people making money by buying and developing land. “I decided to buy a piece of land and try it myself. That’s how it all got started.” Since then, Gillespie has bought and sold over 200 properties.

At age 38, he was able to leave his job to focus on land development. That’s when he decided to run for political office, too.

Gillespie was following state and federal government at the time and came across a draft of legislation that would impact his success buying and selling land.

“There was a piece of legislation floating around and I didn’t like the looks of it,” he says. Gillespie expressed his concerns at a county commissioner’s meeting and was later identified by the legislature to work on the bill as a citizen stakeholder. He credits that experience for sparking his interest in regulatory reform.

Gillespie was first elected to the state House in 1998. During his seven terms as a legislator, Gillespie worked on nearly 100 pieces of regulatory reform, most of which he notes were passed with support from both sides of the aisle. He also led the rewrite of North Carolina’s energy laws.

But Gillespie says what he is most proud of during his time as a legislator is bringing a kidney dialysis center to his district after his aunt died from kidney failure. He spent six years working on changing certificate of need laws that were preventing a dialysis center from opening in their county. His work brought a facility to his district and to four other counties in the state.

After serving seven terms in the legislature, Gillespie was appointed Assistant Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources. In this role, he oversaw the cleanup of the Dan River Coal Ash spill and developed the state’s fracking regulations.

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Gillespie notes that one of his biggest accomplishments was shifting the culture and mindset around permitting at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. “We exist to issue permits,” he says he told the staff. “In order to get a permit, applicants have to follow certain rules. If they’re willing to follow the rules, our job is not to stop, hold up, or be a hindrance to getting a permit. Our job is to help people get permits.”

Gillespie demonstrated throughout his career a deep commitment to balancing both environmental protections and business needs. Gillespie says, “It’s not rocket science balancing the environment and regulatory reform. I love to hike. I love to go outside. I love the land. And I love this state. Why would I want to do anything that would harm the environment for this state?”

“But we have to have growth in North Carolina,” Gillespie adds. And to foster growth, Gillespie says he tried to find consensus between political extremes.

When working on a piece of legislation, Gillespie notes he prioritized hearing from all sides. “I was interested in making changes that were going to last, so I’d work getting consensus from all sides. And guess what? If you do legislation like that, it stays in place.”

Gillespie is quick to add that his success is also a result of learning the issues. The most effective legislators, he believes, are the ones that are prepared, have taken the time to gather data, and understand the history of each issue. “You have to have the knowledge and you have to do your homework,” he says candidly.

Reflecting on his life and career, Gillespie says he is a product of the American dream. “I served in the General Assembly because I wanted to give back what had been given to me. I wanted to help people, and I wanted to preserve the American dream.”

Gillespie is retired now and still calls Western North Carolina home. Asked what keeps him busy in retirement, Gillespie says he enjoys spending time in the mountains of North Carolina. But that’s not all.

“There’s one more thing,” Gillespie laughs. “I buy and sell axes.” Gillespie has collected axes for over 50 years. Fellow collectors travel from across the country to buy from Gillespie and, last year alone, he sold over 1,000 axes. “And that’s without an internet presence,” he notes with pride.

Gillespie certainly has a career to be proud of too.