

## **Longtime Mullins public servant retires**

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Jennifer Bartell  
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Public service may run in his blood, but Mullins City administrator George Hardwick will retire from his post after 20 years of being first, a council member, then the town's chief financial officer and, finally, its administrator. "My family has always been involved with Mullins," Hardwick says. He had a retired uncle who worked as a dispatcher for the Mullins Police Department and cousin J.L. Hardwick served as mayor from 1962-1980. "I can still see things that happened in his term that are still benefiting the city," Hardwick says, referring to the city's deep water wells, waste treatment plants and other infrastructure. Effective June 30, Hardwick's second retirement comes after he first retired in 2000, when he left the banking industry after 38 years at what was first Davis National Bank. Following mergers, that bank is now Carolina First Bank.

Hardwick says he was sworn in as a council member on June 9, 1988, as a plaque on his wall in Mullins City Hall reminds him. Also, Hardwick recalls, he worked in the city's Fire Department and with its Rescue Squad during the late 1960s and 70s. With that service to the city, he says his total years of commitment to Mullins, as an employee or as an elected official, is nearly 35 years. Hardwick says he was born in Conway, but his family moved to Mullins when he was a child. He is a Mullins High School graduate who attended the University of South Carolina School of Banking in 1969 and then Memphis State (University of Memphis) Mid-South School of Banking. He also attended American Institute of Banking classes and was president of the Pee Dee Chapter of the organization from 1983-84. He was also a part the South Carolina Bankers Association 35-year club in 1999 and was a member of the S.C. Municipal Finance Officers, Clerks and Treasurers Association.

Davis Bank merged to become Anchor Bank, headquartered in Myrtle Beach, Hardwick says. At that point, he says, he became the director of branch administration. Anchor Bank began with 21 branches, but by the time he retired, there were 33 branches, he says. Shortly after his retirement, Hardwick became the director of finance, or chief financial officer for the city. Mayor Kenneth McDonald served on city council with Hardwick before McDonald's election as mayor. Hardwick took on the dual duties of CFO and administrator after then administrator J.C. Richardson died in 2006. "He's done a fantastic job," McDonald says.

Over the years some of the biggest challenges for the city has been the loss of jobs, causing many citizens to move away from the area. The moving away placed a financial strain on the city. Then the losses in the tobacco industry, which was the backbone of the Mullins economy for many years, Hardwick says, took its toll. Mullins took a "roll up your sleeves and go to work" approach to the challenges, he says. "We knew we couldn't

bring back what was lost, so we had to change direction.” The city worked on improving its image and making the city more attractive, Hardwick says.

Mullins has been awarded millions in Streetscape grants that have aided them with the beautification of Main Street and its downtown areas. “We had to be aggressive to keep the business area vibrant and functioning,” he adds. The city transformed an old dilapidated building on Main Street into the Mullins Florence Darlington Technical Education center, he says, adding that more than 400 students are being educated in the facility.

While he worked in banking, Hardwick says he traveled to many South Carolina towns. Some of them were starting to look like ghost towns, he remembers.

“My thinking was, ‘This is not going to happen to Mullins,’” he says. “(Hardwick) truly loves his hometown and has a passion for seeing good things happen. One meeting that really sticks out to me, we had a lengthy meeting one night to around midnight,” former Mullins Mayor Wayne George writes in an e-mail. George was sworn in as mayor on the same day that Hardwick was sworn in as a council member. “After the meeting, several of us walked over to the Depot and Main Street area. At this time, several ideas were born about new sidewalks and beautification around the Depot and Main Street area and he certainly took a lead on this movement to make our city a more appealing and lively downtown. I know he will be missed but I’m sure due to his love for Mullins he will continue to make contributions for a better Mullins,” George says.

The 66-year-old Hardwick predicts that Mullins will become a retirement community. He says many retirees will want to be close to the beach, but not at the beach, as the city expects tremendous growth with the coming of Interstate 73, Hardwick says the city’s infrastructure is ready for the growth. During retirement, Hardwick says he plans “to enjoy what he was worked his entire life for,” saying he began working at 14, in the Mullins B.C. Moore’s store. He hopes to do some traveling while on retirement, he says.

“I hate to see him go but (city planner Pete) Rogers will replace him,” McDonald says. “We’re looking for great things out of Pete too,” McDonald says. Hardwick says he had three goals he wanted to accomplish before retiring: make the city attractive; leave the city in good financial condition; and have a replacement ready so that the city would not miss a beat. “I feel very good about leaving this in the very capable hands of Pete Rogers,” Hardwick says. “The city is very fortunate to have someone like him waiting in the wings,” Hardwick adds.

Hardwick has been married to Alice Hardwick for 26 years. They have four children, Mary Elizabeth Hardwick, Dawn Hardwick, Allison Hardwick and Chris Hardwick and two grandchildren Hunter and Taylor. One of the things that stands out about Hardwick to her, is his love for his family, City Hall Customer Representative Jean Brunson says. “I think that relationship has contributed to his professionalism and his success in the business world,” she says, adding that she has enjoyed working with Hardwick and wishes him good health and happiness in his retirement.

“I’ve put 21 years of my life into this thing. I want to see it go into the right direction. This is home and I want the home front taken care of,” he says.

“This is not a perfect world, you will not find a perfect situation. My philosophy is that you strive each day to get to perfection. The harder you try, the closer you’ll get to it. That’s what we tried to do with Mullins,” Hardwick says