



As the head of Wake County's \$250 million bond drive, York often was on the stump speaking to local groups.

Photo by John Rottet

YORK

Continued from page 14

someone who thrives on public service.

York himself says family and community are what drive him.

"I have no political ambitions," he says. "It's more a relation to the community. I feel like my family is a big part of the community, and I've always sort of gravitated to leadership positions and enjoyed being in leadership positions."

ON THE RUN

Whatever his motives, York gives new meaning to the concept of public works.

He had an early start: At the age of five, York was the "red-feather boy" for the old Community Chest, forerunner of the United Way. A photo of young York, decked out in red, accompanied a regularly updated chart that showed the percentage of the Community Chest's goal that had been raised.

As an adult, York has taken a leadership role in the community. In the past 20 years, he has involved himself in four bond referendums, chaired half-a-dozen civic organizations and served or headed a dozen professional groups.

In addition to overseeing his family's vast business holdings through York Properties and York Construction Co., he is chairman of North Carolina Citizens for Business and Industry, the state's biggest business lobbying group. He serves on several committees of the national Urban Land Institute and on the Raleigh-Durham Airport Authority. He's on the board of Rex Hospital in Raleigh. And he's an active alumnus of N.C. State University.

Despite his other commitments, York last March agreed to chair the \$250 million Wake County bond campaign that faced an electorate wary of new spending.

He worked hard. On May 24, for example, a building at Cameron Village, which the Yorks manage, was hit by a fire. York personally took charge of the crisis, but also kept two scheduled appearances for the bond issue - a luncheon talk at the Lion's Club and a formal presentation to the Wake Board of County Commissioners.

The hard work paid off: When the votes were in on June 8, voters had approved the largest local bond issue in state history. The bonds will fund new schools, parks, libraries and Wake Technical Community College.

York says he had no choice but to accept a request to head up the bond

drive: The bonds, he says, are critical to sustaining the Triangle's quality of life.

THE LEGACY

The York legacy dates to before the Civil War.

In 1842, Aldert Smedes — York's maternal great-great grandfather - started St. Mary's, the city's all-girls preparatory school. In 1908, two years before moving to Raleigh, York's grandfather, Charles V. York, built the first buildings on what is now East Carolina University. In Raleigh, he built Patterson Hall at NCSU and Memorial Auditorium downtown.

And Smedes' father, Willie, moved shopping out of downtown and into the suburbs when he built Cameron Village just after World War II.

York inherited the role of the family's business and political leader in 1958, when his older brother, Jimmy, opted to pursue a career in physics rather than engineering.

York at the time was interested in sports, not construction.

"I remember sitting across from Smedes at a banquet table about 20 years ago and during the entire meal, this young man just kept his head down and talked with no one," says Wake County Commissioner Betty Lou Ward. "Now look."

POLITICS

York quickly learned the world of business, and politics was not far behind. As mayor in the early 1980s, York perfected a style of forging coalitions.

"The key is to listen to what people are saying and to find something common in which to talk to them about," York says. "You have to listen. And then once they tell you something, don't start talking about yourself. Ask another question on that subject...and listen."

York pushed through a multimillion-dollar downtown revival, despite concerns by neighborhood activists that the city might be throwing good money after bad. He also proved more sympathetic to rezoning requests.

But after two terms as mayor,

York decided not to run again. He said at the time that he needed to devote more time to his business.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

The Yorks' imprint is evident throughout Wake County. Unlike other developers, the Yorks never have ventured far from home. The family's motto is, "If you can't get there in an hour, you shouldn't be trying to manage it."

But that philosophy didn't save the Yorks from the building bust of the late 1980s. Two years ago, the family turned over more than 400 acres of land, two office buildings and a 107-unit apartment complex to NationsBank as a means of reducing a \$20 million debt the family could no longer pay.

The family's holdings are tightly held, controlled by Smedes, Willie and Smedes' younger brother, Phil, who is executive vice president of York Construction.

York Family Properties, a family partnership that includes six other siblings as minority shareholders, owns more than \$10 million worth of land, shopping centers and office buildings in Wake

County.

Even there, control is concentrated in the hands of Phil and Smedes.

"It takes years to build it, but you can tear it down quickly," says Willie York. "One person dies and then you've got a fight on your hands. If you want it to stay in the family, you have to make choices."

By clearly defining who inherits the business, the elder York says, his family can avoid the infighting that has occurred in other families.

Smedes, Phil and Willie York own properties in Wake County valued for tax purposes at about \$20 million, which includes the \$10 million owned by the family.

FIGHTING MORTALITY

York's devotion to civic matters may be equalled only by his obsession with warding off time's inevitable erosion on his body. Since Jan. 1, 1982, he's either jogged, played golf, racquetball, basketball or biked once every day, through winter's ice storms and summer's 100-degree heat.

For business, he carries around a 2-inch thick daybook, allowing no

one but himself to set his appointments. He records everything - from an 8:30 a.m. jog on a Saturday to a 6 p.m. dinner at Magpies restaurant on a Tuesday.

"If you can schedule it, you can do it," says York. "I don't consider what I'm doing as work or leisure. There are so many hours in a day and a week, and you allot yourself time for various things."

He meticulously documents every mile run or every golf round played, awarding himself points based on the exertion each specific sport requires. Every January, he sends an updated version of his past year's sports regimen to Jim Goodman as a means of needing his equally-competitive friend, who is president of Capitol Broadcasting.

"It drives me crazy," says Goodman. "He's obsessed." Even his wife Rosemary express-

es dismay with some of her husband's idiosyncracies. Sunday nights are reserved for filtering through a large box stacked with papers related to the coming week's schedule. Rosemary York, his wife of nearly 25 years, estimates York spends three to five hours poring over the documents, schooling himself on issues that will confront him in the days ahead.

"It amazes me and infuriates me, quite frankly," she says. "He brings home boxes of stuff that I would think would be a semester's worth of work."

PASSING THE BALL

York no longer is the young athlete who rode the Wolfpack's varsity basketball bench with Les Robinson from 1961-63 under legendary coach Everett Case.

But Robinson, now the NCSU basketball coach, suggests that York's mode of attack may be the same now as it was then.

"I've never seen him pass the ball," says Robinson. "All he was interested in was shooting the ball."

Still, York is beginning to contemplate passing the ball. He says he hopes the company's influence continues through his oldest son, George, who joined York Properties as a leasing agent immediately after his May graduation from Wake Forest University.

"To have a family business," York says, "you have to have a family. It sounds simple, but it's true."

And York, for whom family and community are inextricably connected, says that to help ensure the future of the family business, he'll continue to involve himself in issues ranging from new civic centers and coliseums to bond referendums.

"It's hard to separate them," York says. "The community needs to continue moving forward. I don't think you can sit still. It's like being in a stream that's flowing. If you sit still in anything, you start moving backwards. You can't maintain the status quo. That goes for the community or a business. I want to be involved in moving forward because I just feel I'm a part of it."

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