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DEPARTMENT OF STATE CIVIL SERVICE

NEWS RELEASE

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State Civil Service Commissioner, James A. Smith, set to end longstanding service.

Commissioner James A. Smith is set to end his longstanding service to the State Civil Service Commission at the Commission's regularly scheduled meeting on December 8, 2010. Smith was appointed to the Commission in 1974 after the State Constitution was revised to provide for a seven member State Civil Service Commission, with six commissioners appointed by the governor from nominations made by the presidents of six private Louisiana colleges, and one classified employee-commissioner elected by the classified workforce.

In 1974, the president of Xavier University, Dr. Norman Francis, nominated Smith to serve on the Commission, and Governor Edwin Edwards subsequently appointed him. On January 30, 1975, Smith attended his first Commission meeting. Within his 36 years of service, he has observed the birth and growth of the merit system for the classified service and has played a critical role in the betterment of the state's classified workforce. Smith and his fellow Commissioners have revised the Civil Service Rules to allow agencies greater flexibility in meeting their recruiting, retention, and competitive staffing needs, thereby allowing the agencies to react quickly to changing market conditions while still maintaining the principles of the merit system. The Commission represents the public interest in the improvement of personnel administration of state agencies. The Chairman of the State Civil Service Commission is elected each year by a vote of the commissioners. Smith has been re-elected as Chairman by his fellow commissioners each and every year since 1998.

A native of New Orleans, Smith attended the New Orleans public school system and enlisted in the United States Air Force following World War II and served for five years as an Administrative Officer. Smith went on to obtain his Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Xavier University in 1954. He graduated from Loyola Law School in 1958, and was admitted to the practice of law that same year. After graduating from Xavier, Smith supported his family by processing home loans for the Pontchartrain Park subdivision – one of the first suburban subdivisions developed for middle class blacks in the New Orleans area. During these years of the Civil Rights movement, it was difficult for prospective homeowners to obtain approval on home loans. Smith's manager encouraged him to start a business to help the black community and in 1964, he spearheaded the founding of United Federal Savings and Loan Association on Canal Street in New Orleans.

Smith also began working a second job during his last year at Loyola with a law firm owned by Israel Augustine, Jr. – who was later to become the first black state district judge in Louisiana. The law firm served as general counsel for the Board of Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the late 50's and early 60's. During these years, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. served as its president. Smith said that Dr. King was a great guy and very sincere. "He took no money from the organization and lived humbly. Instead, he supported his family with the money he earned from public speaking and the books he wrote."

In 1966, Smith accepted a position at the New Orleans office of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as Deputy Director and remained there until 1973. During his tenure, he made presentations to explain Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to employers and supervised EEOC investigators and conciliators.

In 1973, Smith was a partner in the first black-owned car dealership in the New Orleans area. Unfortunately, the oil embargo which caused the 1973 oil crisis led to fuel rationing and long lines at gas stations. Consumers began seeking more fuel efficient cars instead of the large Pontiac vehicles sold at Mr. Smith's dealership. As a result, the dealership was sold in 1976.

In 1977, Smith returned to his true calling, practicing law. He practiced law and served as the attorney for United Federal until 1987. Smith went to work for the city of New Orleans in 1987 as an administrative hearing officer with jurisdiction over citizens' appeals of parking tickets. He later supervised and trained other administrative hearing officers when he became Chief Hearing Officer in 1990. He worked for the city until August 26, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina forced his retirement.

Smith has been married to his wife, Eunice Wicker, since 1951. Mrs. Smith obtained her Master's and Doctorate degrees in Education. She taught in public schools for 15 years and was also a Professor of Education at Southern University and the graduate school at Xavier University. The Smith's have five successful adult children. Mr. and Mrs. Smith celebrated their 59th wedding anniversary on September 1st this year. When was asked about the secret to a long and happy marriage, he said with a chuckle, "Give and take."

Smith said of favorite aspect of serving on the Commission, "It gives me great satisfaction to know that I've made a contribution toward making the state a better place for our citizens."

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