

DSCS Congratulates Chairman James A. Smith
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Mr. Smith discusses his years of service with DSCS

Q. Where would you like to see the state go in terms of performance management and “pay for performance?”

A. Pay for performance could be a good thing for the state and there doesn't seem to be a legitimate argument against it. Most employees do a very good job. The key to successful pay for performance is training the supervisors and managers so that they can objectively evaluate the employees' performance. I would like to see a cost of living adjustment (COLA) combined with pay for performance.

Q. You have said in the past that one of the biggest problems that Civil Service has encountered was not changing with the times. Do you feel that we have overcome this challenge?

A. Yes, definitely. In the last 10 years, we have made 20 years of progress. There have been revisions to the Civil Service Rules that allow the agencies more flexibility and discretion than ever before. Agencies also have much more autonomy than in the past. As a result, the relationship between Civil Service and the state agencies has become much more cooperative and we're working together for the benefit of the state.

Q. What do you foresee as Civil Service's biggest challenges for the future?

A. We need to do better on public relations so that legislators, the media, and the general public will know that we have one of the best workforces in the United States in the classified service.

We also need to let employees know that they are appreciated for their dedicated service to the state.

Q. What would be your advice to the next Chairman of the State Civil Service Commission?

A. My advice to the next Chairman would be to continue what we've started, to be progressive and change with the times, to assist the agencies in giving the citizens of Louisiana the best possible service, to never forget the integrity of the system and why it exists, and to never compromise your principles.

Q. What has been your favorite aspect of serving on the State Civil Service Commission?

A. It gives me great satisfaction to know that I've made a contribution toward making the state a better place for our citizens.

Q. What are your plans after leaving the State Civil Service Commission?

A. I plan to continue traveling the world with my wife. We are currently planning a trip to Morocco and I would love to see West Africa and Kenya next.

Q. Do you have a personal motto, or favorite saying that inspires you?

A. The Golden Rule and the Prayer of Jabez. I have the Prayer of Jabez (1 Chronicles 4:10) on my key ring and I take it everywhere with me.

Q. Do you remember an event or person that influenced you to be the person you are today?

A. My father had a big influence on my life. He was a high school graduate with good common sense. I remember seeking his advice whenever I had to make a tough decision. He passed away in 1987, but I cherish the times we had together.

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Mr. Smith (far right) with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Biography of James A. Smith

Mr. James A. Smith, a native of New Orleans, was born on October 20, 1927, as the only child of Gertrude Blanks and James A. Smith, Jr. His father worked for the Pullman Company as a [Pullman porter](#) traveling throughout the United States preparing the sleeping quarters for the train passengers. His mother was a stay-at-home mom.

Mr. Smith recalls that because he was always tall for his age, his first job was at age 13. He worked for a local pharmacy delivering pharmaceuticals for a salary of \$5.00 a week. During high school, he worked for the Postal Service during Christmas holidays delivering mail. In his last semester of high school, he worked after school each night until midnight as a “scaler” at a local shipyard, scraping rust from the hulls of ships with a wire brush.

He attended New Orleans public schools for his primary education and graduated from McDonald 35 Sr. High School. After high school, he enlisted in the United States Air Force following World War II and served for five years as an Administrative Officer. Mr. Smith went on to obtain his Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Xavier University in 1954. While at Xavier, he played on the basketball team. He graduated from Loyola Law School in 1958, and was admitted to the practice of law that same year.

Mr. Smith met his wife, Eunice Wicker, while attending Xavier and they married in 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.

After graduating from Xavier, Mr. 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. Mr. 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.

Mr. 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. Mr. 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, Mr. 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, Mr. 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.

The state constitution was revised in 1974 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 Mr. Smith to serve on the Commission, and Governor Edwin Edwards subsequently appointed him. On January 30, 1975, Mr. Smith attended his first Commission meeting. He states that in those early years, the Commission mainly heard appeals. Since then, the Commission has 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. Agencies also come to the Commission to publicly discuss changes that could have an impact on classified employees, such as contracting services to private companies. The Commission represents the public interest in the improvement of personnel administration of state agencies, and in his 36 years on the Commission, Mr. Smith believes that this duty has been taken very seriously by the commissioners.

In 1977, Mr. Smith returned to his true calling, practicing law. He practiced law and served as the attorney for United Federal until 1987. He had his own law firm with one of his daughters for

awhile, but downsized his practice when she decided to move to St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands.

Mr. 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. He then moved to Baton Rouge to avoid the long commute.

The Smith's have five successful adult children who live in different locations. Their oldest daughter graduated from Harvard and obtained an MBA from Columbia University. She met her husband, an investment banker, and decided to stop working when they had children. They currently live in Boston. Another of the Smith daughters obtained a Master's degree in Social Work from Tulane University and married a psychiatrist. She also decided to stop working when they had children, and they currently live in New Jersey. The youngest daughter practiced law with Mr. Smith and currently works for a retirement agency in St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, and is unmarried. The eldest son works as an FBI agent and lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with his wife and son. The Smiths' youngest son works in the information technology field. He lives in Houston and has been married two years. Mr. Smith and his wife instilled the principle of excellence into their children at an early age. Mr. Smith recalls driving his young sons around the New Orleans area to show them the hard work that some men had to do to earn a living, in the hope that his sons would be motivated to obtain an education. Mr. and Mrs. Smith celebrated their 59th wedding anniversary on September 1st this year. When Mr. Smith was asked about the secret to a long and happy marriage, he said with a chuckle, "Give and take."

The Chairman of the State Civil Service Commission is elected each year by a vote of the commissioners. Mr. Smith has been reelected as Chairman by his fellow commissioners each and every year since 1998. Mr. Smith said that one of the highlights of serving as Chairman was to know that his peers believe that he has done a good job.