

How County Government Has Changed Since the Reform Era of the Mid-1970s

By Dr. Luther Frederick Carter, President of Francis Marion University

On August 6, Dr. Luther Frederick Carter delivered the following keynote speech at SCAC's 38th Annual Conference:

I have always had a strong affinity for county government.

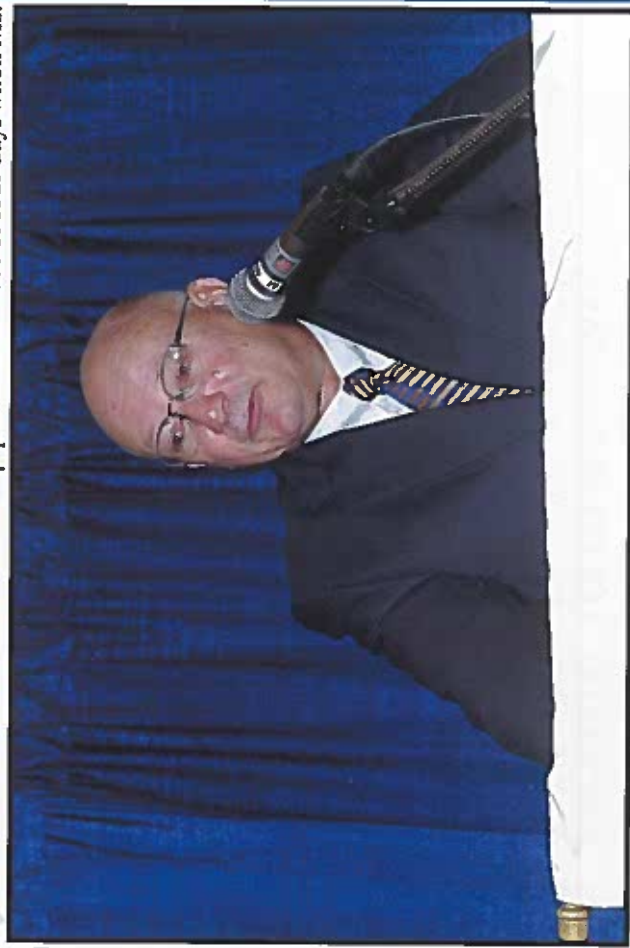
I can remember as an undergraduate reading a book by Vincent Marando entitled, "Counties: The Forgotten Governments." I was intrigued by the book and similarly intrigued by Marando's prediction that counties would be the most dynamic level of government by the end of the 20th century—prophetic, but hardly surprising.

Of course, many of us in public administration have long opined that our counties truly constitute "the last frontier" administratively. I don't mean that in any pejorative sense. County government is simply the level of government with the most political tension and the most complex array of problems.

My public career in South Carolina actually began in county government. In 1977, I was appointed as a county administrator in Bamberg County—one of the first administrators selected as a result of the structural changes authorized by the

Clerk, Helen Free, what a wonderful lady, and how marvelously patient and long suffering she was in dealing with my misguided zeal. These folks were willing to take a chance on a 26-year-old, freshly-minted MPA whose previous managerial experience had consisted exclusively of being an infantry officer in the Marine Corps.

But it was the culture of that county government that I remember most—the role of the delegation, the cliquishness of the courthouse gang, the institutionalization of various rituals, or maybe it was the ritualizing of various institutions. Permit me one story that catches the essence of those times: I had been in the position for three or four days when Ms.



During the General Session on Saturday morning, Aug. 6, Dr. Luther Frederick Carter, President of Francis Marion University, delivers the keynote address for SCAC's 38th Annual Conference (Aug. 4-7). (Photo by Stuart Morgan)

Local Government Act of 1975, the Home Rule Act, which coincidentally was passed 30 years ago this summer.

I remember that experience as though it were yesterday. Members of my council—Sam Neely, Mac Clinkscales, Poodle Kinsey—my County

Free slipped something a tad unusual in my inbox—a bill for \$150 for the purchase of law books. I asked her what this involved, and she responded that we had an Associate Justice of the State Supreme Court with offices on the second floor of the courthouse—a Judge Ness, Bubba Ness.

She explained that the county routinely honored the invoices that the judge's secretary sent down for law books, supplies, etc. I considered this situation with all of the care and deliberation that my considerable experience permitted, and immediately responded that this was ridiculous—the Supreme Court was a state level

court, the state judiciary had a budget, and that budget was intended to fund such obligations.

Helen's efforts to talk me out of this course of action failed, and the bill was returned upstairs. The following morning I received an invitation to meet with Judge Ness in his chambers. We spent a very cordial half hour discussing a range of topics from my background to the characteristics of the county. Then, the conversation took a very pronounced turn. The Judge told me that his previous experience with the county administrator form of government—when he was on the bench in Aiken—was abysmal.

Apparently, Aiken County had hired a new administrator there "who wouldn't listen to a damn thing that anyone told him." He lasted a few months, and the judge was convinced the administrator form would not survive in Aiken County. "They got off to a bad start with this new government and people never forget..." To my chagrin, he went on to tell me that he thought that the jury was also out on

tiously. About a month later, the Judge called one day to ask if I were free for lunch.

On a monthly basis thereafter we'd go to lunch and talk about all manner of issues, but mostly South Carolina politics and government. And I'm most proud of the fact that when I left that job to return (Continued on next page)

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