

# Patterson turns from banking to conservation

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**F**resh off shedding his title as CEO of Palmetto Bancshares Inc., Leon Patterson will pursue another passion – conservation and the advancement of Upstate Forever.

After 42 years in the banking industry, Patterson plans to guard his time, and slowly exhaust his voluntary commitments with groups like the Upstate Alliance to spend more time with nature.

But he's not removing himself from public life or The Palmetto Bank, where has served as leader since 1975.

Patterson, 68, became bank president that year, at age 34. In 1978, he became chairman and CEO of the holding company. Patterson joined the Laurens-based bank in 1967 as an assistant cashier.

"I doubt banks ever use that title any more," Patterson said with a laugh. "People used ask me what an assistant cashier does, and I'd say, 'I don't really know.'"

Through that role, Patterson did a little of everything. At the time, Palmetto Bank had about \$13 million in assets, a dozen employees and firm roots in Laurens.

Today, it has assets of \$1.8 billion, 29



Leon Patterson. (Photo/Provided)

locations across the Upstate and a new headquarters in downtown Greenville.

"We had to be where the economic engine is, and there's no doubt that the I-85 corridor is the economic engine," Patterson said of the move from Laurens, where the bank was founded in 1906.

Though it changed its headquarters, the bank and its news leadership maintains strong ties to the area.

Patterson remains chairman of the holding company and the bank and has no plans to retire from that position. Sam Erwin took over duties as CEO and Lee Dixon as COO as part of a succession plan that began to take shape in 2008.

Erwin is a Greenwood County native and cum laude graduate of Clemson University with more than 19 years of banking experience, most recently as CEO of Community Bankshares Inc. in Orangeburg, which had been acquired by First Citizens Bank & Trust.

Dixon is a Laurens County native and a magna cum laude graduate from the University of South Carolina who was admitted as a partner in the Banking and Capital Markets practice of PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP in 1999. There, he worked with many of the largest banks in the country as well as numerous community banks and finance companies.

Patterson said the bank's directors knew Erwin and Dixon by their reputations, but Patterson also knew them personally.

"In high school, two of the people I looked up to the most were King Dixon and Bob Erwin," Patterson recalled. "There were part of probably the finest football team that Laurens High School ever put on the field."

Though the two football stars were older than Patterson, he became family friends with them and later in life, would keep tabs on their children. Bob Erwin had a son named Sam. King Dixon had a son named Lee.

The hiring of Sam Erwin and Lee Dixon has made the transition easier for Patterson, who admits being second guessed about the move. He said its time for the "young guys" to take over.

"They're full of energy," Patterson said.

He admits that the recession and related troubles in the banking industry have been draining but noted that he named his successors before the recession hit.

Patterson is ready for more free time, for more time to relax in the outdoors.

In March, his term as chairman as Upstate Alliance will expire. He's also pulling back from other public options, though he mentioned he owes more time to his role as a trustee at Wofford College and will always be active in the Blue Ridge Council, Boy Scouts of America.

Patterson has served the American Bankers Association, the South Carolina Bankers Association, the Greater Laurens Chamber of Commerce, the Upper Savannah Council of Governments,

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the Greenville Symphony Association, the board of the Peace Center for the Performing Arts, The ABA Stonier National Graduate School of Banking at the University of Pennsylvania, the Greenville County Art Museum Association, the Medical University of South Carolina Board of Visitors, the Lander University Foundation Board of Directors, the Laurens Public Square Development Commission and the United Way of Laurens County.

He's also founding member of the Board of Regents for Leadership Lau-

rens County and a founding member of Main Street Laurens, USA.

In 2001, Patterson was named South Carolina Ambassador for Economic Development by Gov. Jim Hodges and in 2006 named to The Order of The Palmetto by Gov. Mark Sanford.

"I certainly am going to be more careful about guarding my free time to do the things I love again," Patterson said, pointing out the pictures around his office of him fishing, hiking and water skiing with his son, Pat, and wife, Barbara.

In November, he'll become chair of Upstate Forever, the conservation group

based in Greenville that has protected more than 3,800 acres of farms, fields, forests, waters, and wildlife habitat. The nonprofit group is more than a land-trust. It's also active in promoting sustainable development and clean air and water.

Part of his new found time will be reserved for Upstate Forever.

"It parallels my love of the outdoors," Patterson said.

"I think everybody's always asking themselves: 'Is there something that I've always wanted to do but never had the time to?'" Patterson said. "For me, that's Upstate Forever." ☞