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F ormer Howard County Executive J. Hugh Nichols, who guided the county through a period of rapid growth from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, died Dec. 8 in Maplesville, Ala. He was 85.

Elected to the executive post in 1978, Nichols, a longtime Democrat who at the end of his career switched his affiliation to the Republican party, served two terms as the head of Howard County government. The predominantly rural county was growing at a fast clip during that time, with a population that more than tripled between 1970 and 1990.

"At a critical time in our county's development, Hugh Nichols provided wise and steady leadership that helped Howard County grow and prosper," current Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman said in a statement. "Using his extensive experience in government as well as his considerable charm and good humor, he led the many elements of a growing community toward a shared vision of what we could become."

The Howard County executive post capped Nichols' more than 20-year political career in Maryland, which also included stints as a Howard County Councilman and state delegate.

He first became involved in politics in 1965, when he participated in a petition drive to establish a charter form of government in the county. The effort was successful, and Nichols was one of the drafters of the charter, which was adopted in 1968 and established an executive-based model of government, replacing the county commission format.

In 1969, Nichols was elected to the first County Council, where he served for two years until he was appointed to a vacant seat in the House of Delegates. He served for nearly two terms as the delegate for District 14B, which at the time represented the entire county except for Clarksville and Fulton.

In 1977, he left the State House to work as assistant secretary of budget and fiscal planning under acting Gov. Blair Lee III.

Nichols launched a campaign for county executive and defeated incumbent County Executive Ed Cochran by 3,000 votes in the 1978 Democratic primary. He was elected county executive that November, handily beating out Republican opponent James S. Ansell, by a margin of more than 4-to-1.

As county executive, Nichols embraced a philosophy of fiscal conservatism. "He thought the county should live within its means," said Raquel Sanudo, who worked as Nichols' administrative assistant and later became the county's chief administrative officer under County Executive Chuck Ecker.

Early in his first term, Nichols took on the task of finding a location for a new landfill for the growing county. He settled upon a site near the intersection of Route 70 and Marriottsville Road, which would open in 1980 as the Alpha Ridge landfill. "At the time, he was able to determine that was where the development of the future would be," Sanudo said.

Other initiatives included allowing police officers to take home their patrol cars and working with the business community to make the county's permitting process smoother.

"He was able to multitask," Sanudo recalled. "He could do two, three, four things at a time, work on a complicated budget and an environmental issue" simultaneously.

His tenure was also marked by skirmishes with the County Council. Nichols belonged to the more conservative wing of Howard County's Democratic party, which was in those days split between Columbia liberalism and the more moderate views predominant among Democrats outside Columbia's boundaries.

"He was considerably more conservative than I am, and considerably more conservative than most of the people on the council, but he worked very hard for what he believed in and was a good, hard-working public servant," said retired Del. Liz Bobo, who served on the Howard County Council during the Nichols administration.

Jim Kraft, a Baltimore City councilman who served as chairman of the state's Democratic party during in the mid-80s and was part of its more liberal wing, said Nichols "was the personification of 'you can disagree without being disagreeable.'

"He played politics the way they should be played," Kraft said. "He would be a good model for people in Washington today."

"There were some issues on which we didn't agree, but I knew he was committed to his position," said C. Vernon Gray, who was council chairman during Nichols' last year in office. "We got a lot done."

Longtime resident Sherman Howell, who in the 1980s chaired a commission to organize a celebration of the life of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., credited Nichols with helping get those events off the ground.

"We had an obligation to recognize the life and legacy of Dr. King," Howell said. "He immediately agreed."

"Hugh was politically adept but not overly partisan; he got along with the farmers of our county's past and the planners and dreamers of its future. He served us all well," said Kittleman.

A Columbia columnist, reflecting on Nichols' first year as county executive, wrote that he had established himself "as a 'doin'-it' administrator," whose legacy might be best reflected by a picture of the executive standing in the middle of a construction site in a three-piece suit. Nichols told a local reporter that a typical work day lasted from 6 a.m. to 1 a.m.

In 1985, toward the end of his second term as executive, term-limited and keeping his eyes on his next move, Nichols announced his decision to convert to the Republican party, which had been wooing him as a potential gubernatorial candidate. He had earlier filed to run as the Democratic candidate for governor, but dropped out of that race because he didn't generate enough interest among a pool of better-known opponents. Just a few months later, he surprised Republican allies by announcing he would not run after all, citing lack of financial support and the unlikelihood of beating Baltimore Mayor William Donald Schaefer, the Democratic frontrunner.

In 1986, with less than a year to go as county executive, Nichols resigned his post to take a job as an economic development official for Middle South Utilities, based in New Orleans.

"If you checked my history, you would have seen that I have never completed a term of office," he said at the time. "I have always moved on to things that were greater."

After leaving politics, Nichols worked for some time in Albania as a contract employee for government contractor Mendez England and Associates. "I'm going to work until I blow out like a light bulb," he told a reporter for The Baltimore Sun.

Pervasive throughout Nichols' life and career was the theme of self-made success and perseverance.

Born poor on a dirt farm in central Alabama, he dropped out of high school for a time to support his family, passing his GED later. He spent 6 1/2 years in the Army Signal Corps and then enrolled at the University of Alabama, where he earned a bachelor's degree. He went on to earn a master's from American University.

In 1957, he moved to Howard County for a job with the National Security Agency. Nichols, his wife, Sue, and their five children lived in the Sebring community, just outside of Columbia.

"People who remember know that Hugh Nichols came to Howard County with a U-Haul trailer and his wife, not sure where he was going or what he was doing when he came," said Rochell Brown, the county's housing and community development coordinator under Nichols. "He came here essentially with nothing and he built himself a business and he built himself a reputation to become county executive. He was a very practical person that was doing things that he saw as necessary from a political standpoint to make the county work better."

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