



# THIS WEEK'S SPEAKER

June 1, 2021

## 2020- 2021 Board Members

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Past Pres John Lassiter  
Secretary Bill Bradley  
Treasurer Edwin Peacock  
Exec Sec Christine Cipriano

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Colleen Brannan  
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Cheryl Banks  
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Bill Bradley  
Kim Brattain  
David Tobin



## James "Smuggie" Mitchell, President, Leeper Construction (and formerly on City Council)

By Henry Bostic

With his characteristic exuberance toned down just a bit, former Charlotte City Council Member, James "Smuggie" Mitchell told Rotarians Tuesday how, with Hugh McColl's help, he became president and part owner of R.L. Leeper Construction Co. As one of the founders of a new investment firm, Bright Hope Capital LLC, Mr. McColl and partners hope to help Black- and Hispanic-owned business grow, expand and prosper with injections of capital and leveraging decades of executive experience.

Bright Hope Capital's goal is to create wealth and opportunities for Black- and Brown-owned businesses in the greater Charlotte region.

Mitchell briefly told the story of how, with the former Bank of America CEO Hugh McColl's help, Ron Leeper founded RL Leeper Construction Co. and how that led ultimately to the establishment of Bright Hope Capital.

After Leeper lost his bid in 1988 for an at-large seat on the Charlotte City Council, Mitchell related, Hugh McColl called Leeper to his office and asked how he could help him become successful in his next career. Mitchell said Leeper said there were no African American general contractors in the Queen City. Give me three weeks, McColl said to Leeper.

Three weeks later the two got together again and McColl said I've heard you loud and clear and I've got an opportunity for you. Leeper was offered an opportunity to learn about general contracting with a position at F. N. Thompson Construction, then one of Charlotte's largest. The company would pay half his salary and Bank of America the other half.

In 1993, Leeper felt he'd learned sufficiently and founded his eponymous company. "Remember who planted that seed," Mitchell said, "Hugh McColl, one of our greatest leaders in the history of Charlotte."

Twenty-seven successful years later, Leeper was in his 70s and his wife was wanting him “to come home and retire,” the Charlotte native said. However, Leeper was unsuccessful in his efforts to develop a workable succession plan that would keep the company viable.

What did Leeper do? He turned to his friend Hugh McColl again. Leeper presented his dilemma and McColl responded characteristically (although Mitchell gave a PG version): “It would be a crying shame if we can’t find a way for Leeper Construction to continue.” Again, McColl asked for three weeks to think about it.

McColl, said Mitchell, recruited two other executives in the city -- Malcomb Coley, Charlotte managing partner at Ernst & Young and Lloyd Yates, a former executive vice president at Duke Energy – who together, founded Bright Hope Capital with a vision of creating and maintaining Black- and Brown-owned business in Charlotte.

“Hugh McColl is 86 years young,” Mitchell said. “Instead of retiring and spending all his time in Texas hunting or at his place at the beach, he’s still passionate about this community, this city.”

On December 4, 2020, the North Carolina Central University grad got a call from Ron (Leeper). “We’ve been working with Hugh on Bright Hope Capital and I think you’re going to be excited about the things we’re trying to do. The first deal,” Ron said, “will be Leeper Construction.” At the time, Mitchell was working for J. E. Dunn. “The Bright Hope board has voted to name you president of Leeper Construction.”

“Be careful what you ask for,” Mitchell recalled. “I was so excited then I realized... Oh my god, how do you follow a legend, a leader like Ron Leeper? He’s done so much for the community, not just his construction company.” Mitchell noted that Leeper has been his mentor since 1981.

On January 4, Mitchell met with the 21 Leeper employees. “I realized,” he said, “that not everyone can absorb my high energy in the morning. I had to tone down my hyper-energized bunny.”

One of his first acts was to give all employees a three percent raise; he also gave them company swag. “I want then to be proud when they go out into the community,” he said.

One of the major improvements to come with the Bright Hope acquisition is that the company’s bonding limit increases from a mere \$15 million to nine digits, which is huge. It opens many opportunities for participating in much larger projects.

Mitchell had to give up his seat on the City Council, the part time job for the full-time one, because of conflicts of interests since Leeper Construction is involved in the convention center and airport construction projects. But there are rewards: his 25 percent interest in the company means he will be able to pass along wealth to future generations.

Mitchell ended his remarks with another shout-out to Hugh McColl and recommended the former bank’s new book, *Beyond the Bank*. “He’s 86 and still has that can-do attitude.”

\*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/558106471>

Mr. Mitchell’s introduction begins at approximately 22:00 minutes.