

For former Hollings staff, a chance to reunite

It was the first reunion since senator retired in 2005

By JOHN O'CONNOR

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JULY 24, 2010 -- About 200 former staffers for Fritz Hollings gathered with him Friday at the University of South Carolina to celebrate the dedication of the Ernest F. Hollings Special Collections Library.

Tripp King, a former chief of staff who worked for the longtime U.S. senator for 28 years, said it was the first time staff had reunited since Hollings retired from the U.S. Senate in 2005.

“Hollings’ staff has always been a close-knit staff,” he said. “This could not have been a better opportunity to try to bring everybody together.”

Staff had at least two receptions on Friday to reconnect, though many remain influential in Washington, D.C., and South Carolina.

National Transportation Safety Board chairman **Deborah Hersman** worked with Hollings on the Senate Commerce Committee as did Federal Communications Commissioner **Michael Copps**.

“It’s like a high school reunion,” said former staffer **Nu Wexler**, now communications director for the House Education and Committee. Wexler said at least 10 other former Hollings staffers were on his early-morning Friday flight from Washington. to Columbia.

“You will see lifetimes of people inspired by his leadership,” said former Hollings spokesman **Andy Brack**, now Statehouse Report publisher. Brack now helps Hollings

publish op-ed pieces on FritzHollings.com. “The administration today and agencies all across, you see people who went through the school of Hollings in various ways.”

‘Start governing!’

One former staffer who might not have enjoyed Hollings’ speech Friday as much? White House press secretary **Robert Gibbs**, who worked on Hollings final re-election campaign in 1998.

Hollings chastised **President Obama** for policies that have failed to close the trade deficit and for relying on Harvard economists for advice. The United States needs to start manufacturing again, Hollings said, and the government must pass laws to keep U.S.-made goods competitive.

“Get rid of the economists and start governing!” Hollings bellowed.

“I’d like to think so’

Hollings’ famed candor, and the current political climate, led to some disagreement about whether a politician who speaks his mind could win election.

Hollings once referred to a Jewish colleague as the “senator from B’nai Brith” and responded to a challenge to take a drug test — from 1986 GOP Senate candidate **Henry McMaster** — by saying, “I’ll take a drug test, if you take an IQ test.”

“I’d like to think so,” said state Rep. **Gilda Cobb-Hunter**, D-Orangeburg, after a pause,

considering whether a Hollings-like candidate could succeed. “I wish we had more politicians today like Fritz Hollings. All we have now is a bunch of folks who just want to be comfortable.”

Odds and ends

Not comfortable at Friday’s dedication? Everybody in attendance. USC set out 906 chairs in the Thomas Cooper Library. All were filled with dozens standing in the back of the room. University officials estimated between 1,100 and 1,200 people attended the event. Though Columbia temperatures

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reached the upper 90s outside, the large crowd meant it was not much cooler inside the library.

The crowd was mostly Democratic. U.S. Sen. **Lindsey Graham** was the only Republican member of the S.C. congressional delegation to attend.

Security at the dedication, supervised by the Secret Service, was little trouble, though some reported getting trapped in traffic as Vice President **Joe Biden’s** motorcade made its way to a fundraiser for U.S. Rep. **John Spratt**, D-York, at the State Museum.