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Who Is Jim Sills?

And
can he run
Wilmington?

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SPECIAL BUSINESS & POLITICAL SECTIONS

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WILMINGTON

UNDER

SILLS

The life story of the city's first black mayor reads like an old Horatio Alger novel. But now the 61-year-old firebrand's greatest challenge looms ahead.

by Charles P. Wilson

The aroma of simmering soul food wafted through the dimly lighted auditorium on the East Side, where a sizable chunk of Wilmington's black community had gathered for a rite of passage.

Young and old, prosperous and poor,

unanimous election as the first black mayor of Wilmington. And beyond that, the long-time Democrat activist had just become the first of his race to hold any major executive post in Delaware government.

No matter that he arrived an hour and a half after the scheduled time to take the podium at the Walnut Street YMCA auditorium. As time passed, the crowd only grew — in size and in anticipation.

Just being neighborly, Louise Spaulding— who lives next door to the Sillses —cheers the new mayor's acceptance speech.

Finally a buzzing began to spread through the room. Then it escalated to a rumbling that left no one in doubt. The Sills family had arrived. And as rock music blared on the turned-up volume of the cassette-player, Jim Sills stepped through the doors.

Carrying himself like a boxer heading for the ring, and slowly — almost cautiously — making his way through the lane of pres-

sing bodies, opened by his staff people, Sills moved to the stage. His face betrayed an obvious emotional high. And when he got to the podium, he praised his people and not himself.

"Tonight we have finally come of political age, and this is only the beginning," he told the audience. "We won because we believed in each other, and trusted each other. It was a coalition of voters, because of a commonality of needs. Our campaign workers out-hustled and out-smarted our opponents. The entire community has won," he told the raucous, good-natured throng.

Sills took the time to individually thank numerous friends, supporters and campaign workers whom he felt had some hand in his victory. And he didn't forget a small soul food restaurant — Walt's Flavor Crisp in northeast Wilmington. "They gave us a lot of chicken," said a beaming Sills.

Blended in with the mostly black crowd that jammed the Y were a contingent of a dozen or so Latin-American supporters and a smattering of white faces. They appeared to be mostly middle- and working-class residents of the city, many from the East Side where the Sills family has lived for decades.



they had come together to joyfully accept the mantle of political maturity.

It was Nov. 3, 1992, election night. The crowd was in a celebrating mood, cheering lustily. Because tonight, 61-year-old Jim Sills was officially accepting his near-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN FLEMING

The victory celebration was sweetened by the fact that Sills had been an underdog in the Democratic primary. He had mounted a come-from-way-behind, grass-roots and underfunded campaign to unseat two-term incumbent Dan Frawley, who is

white and most-often identified with the traditional Irish neighborhoods of the city's West Side. Frawley also had the blessing of the city party organization.

And although Wilmington's 71,000 population is now just over half black, the pundits had cast Frawley as the winner over Sills, who is eminently qualified for the job by education, experience and, most importantly, character.

But on primarily election

day, Sept. 12, Sills pulled out a stunning, if narrow, victory over Frawley, who had apparently thought he would have no trouble getting a third term. Republicans have not been a serious factor in Wilmington city politics for decades.

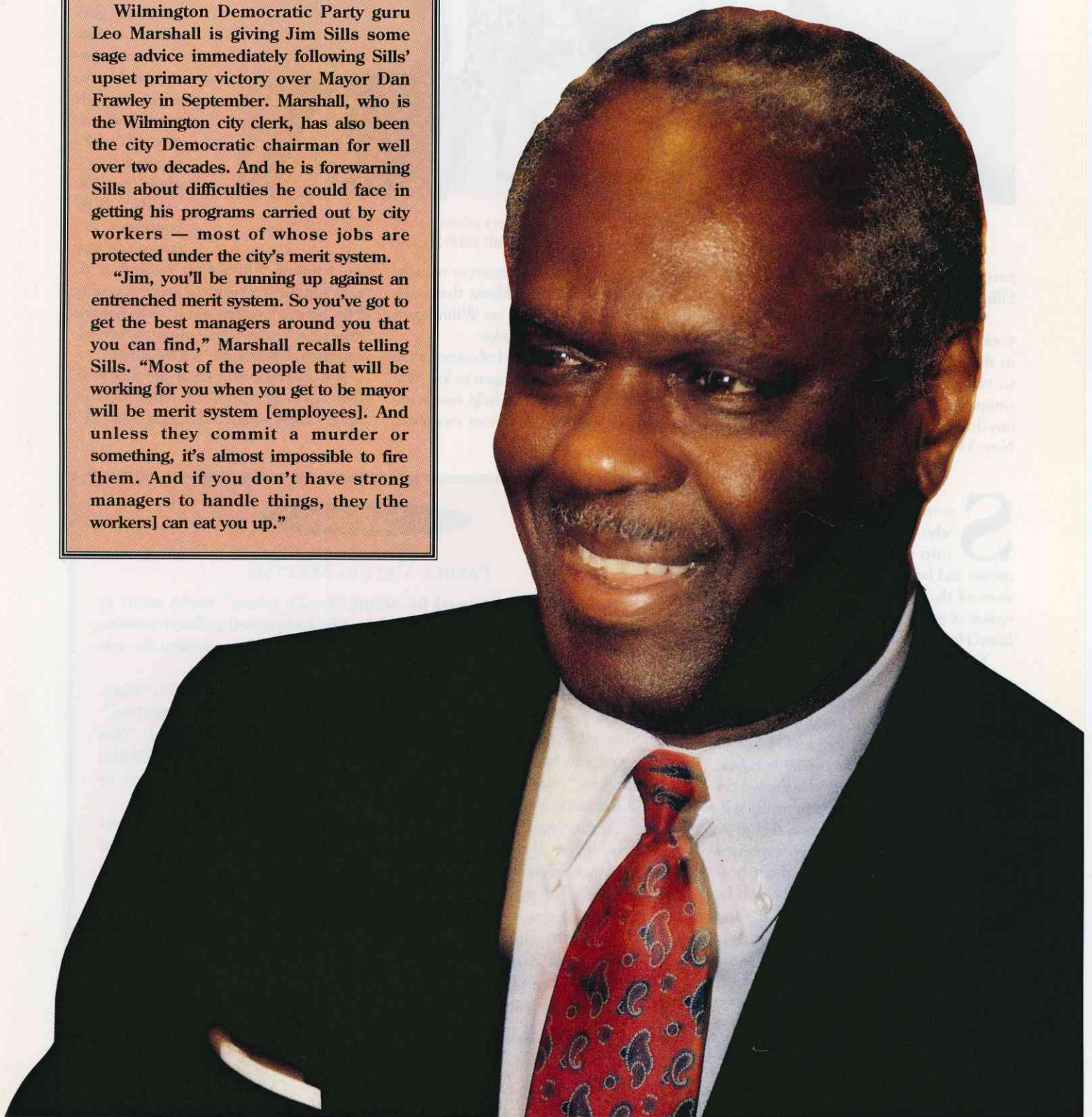
But in the general election, Sills still had to get past a candidate, Beatrice Patton Carroll, another black community activist who had run unsuccessfully in two previous Democratic primaries against Frawley. This time Carroll had allied herself with a third

LEO MARSHALL ADVISES:

BEWARE THE MERIT SYSTEM

Wilmington Democratic Party guru Leo Marshall is giving Jim Sills some sage advice immediately following Sills' upset primary victory over Mayor Dan Frawley in September. Marshall, who is the Wilmington city clerk, has also been the city Democratic chairman for well over two decades. And he is forewarning Sills about difficulties he could face in getting his programs carried out by city workers — most of whose jobs are protected under the city's merit system.

"Jim, you'll be running up against an entrenched merit system. So you've got to get the best managers around you that you can find," Marshall recalls telling Sills. "Most of the people that will be working for you when you get to be mayor will be merit system [employees]. And unless they commit a murder or something, it's almost impossible to fire them. And if you don't have strong managers to handle things, they [the workers] can eat you up."





The Sills family was a living example of "family values" long before the term became a political catch phrase, as evidenced by this mid-1970s photo. Jim Jr. holds son Mark, while son Jimmy III stands and Evelyn holds Julie.

"We must get more resources from the county," says Sills.

He also sees the need for city government to become more representative, in terms of personnel, of the population in general. "White males have dominated city government, and we need more managers and workers to make us more representative of the city population as a whole," says Sills.

Also, Sills continues, the mayor and city

party, the A Delaware Party, to contest Sills' candidacy.

Although Sills beat Frawley by 925 votes — and took 54 percent of those cast in the primary — he said he wasn't going to take any chances. Throughout the campaign, he insisted he was "not taking anything lightly." Sills beat Carroll on Nov. 3 by 20,700 to 2,160 votes.

needs to provide more resources to help alleviate some of the problems that have been increasingly dumped on Wilmington during the past several decades.

One example is the need of county areas outside the city to be more open to low- and middle-income housing to help ease some of the overcrowding in various city areas.

government "should be looked at as providing the leadership to improve quality of life for every citizen and to address social problems, particularly unemployment, housing and drug abuse, among others."

Among those who know Jim Sills well, there is strong agreement about the new mayor's many positive character traits. An

So who is this black populist Moses who has come to lead his people into Delaware's political mainstream and help get them a more equitable share of the fruits offered by a democratic system of government? Where did he come from? How did he get to where he is?

Young pool hustler, farm boy, soldier, social worker, community firebrand, legislator, academician, dedicated husband and father and now mayor of Wilmington — it's been quite an odyssey for James H. Sills Jr.

But there are still many in Wilmington and throughout Delaware who know very little, if anything, about the normally self-effacing Jim Sills. And it appears that more than normal concern has been expressed since Sills' election victories about how effectively and even-handedly he will be able to govern such a diverse — and problem-wracked — city.

Sills is not without his visions of where he wants to see Wilmington go. He believes there needs to be better cooperation between the governments of Wilmington and New Castle County — that the county

SILLS HAS ALWAYS SAID:

FAMILY VALUES MATTER

Realization of the need for strong "family values" might seem to have burst upon the American public this just-passed political season, thanks to the enlightenment provided by candidates running for top national office.

But this is what Jim Sills was saying back in October of 1969. "Many of the problems of the inner city begin with the families themselves," Sills told a reporter for the old Wilmington Evening Journal. "Not enough is being done by Wilmington [social] agencies to help stabilize families," added Sills, who by that time had earned a master's degree in social work.

At the time Sills was serving as executive director of the now-defunct Association of Greater Wilmington Neighborhood Centers. This was an organization to consolidate the administration and better coordinate the functions of the city's four major non-profit neighborhood resident service centers.

And Sills also saw problems within the city that still seem to be nagging the community today. "One problem here in Wilmington is that there are no broad, overall goals toward which the community is working," he said more than two decades ago.

and financial leaders have met with Sills to pledge their support for his administration.

"Jim will work very well with the whites," says Peuquet, who has worked closely with him for nearly a decade. "It's a matter of waiting and seeing and getting to

expiration date and the other three — police, firefighters and white-collar workers — all expire by early spring of '93. It's considered a given that all these unions want significant wage raises.

"I don't think anything in Jim's experience has prepared him for something like this," says one top Frawley administration member. "He's a got a family and I'm sure he has no idea how these union people can harass you when you resist them. They play pretty rough. I don't think he's ready for that."

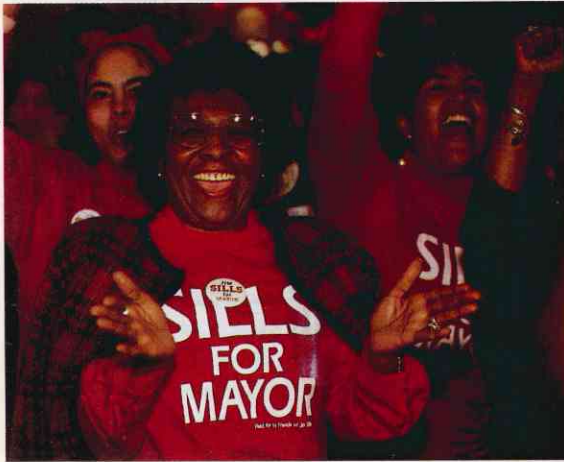
Sills will also be facing a decision on whether to build a new \$47.5 million convention center downtown or put the plan in limbo. During the campaign Sills opposed the Frawley administration plan to build any such facility until a comprehensive program is

support to a civic center, Wilmington's residents will have to shoulder an additional tax burden to subsidize it for many years to come, says Sills. The new mayor does, however, support the construction now underway for the new baseball and general purpose stadium along the city's waterfront.

One major way that Sills proposes to revitalize city business is by harnessing the financial power of Wilmington's Urban Development Action Grants to make start-up and improvement loans to the city's small business people. These federal grants, also known as UDAG, are no longer available but the interest, coming back to the city from previous loans, is.

Sills wants to use this interest, many hundreds of thousands of dollars, for these small business loans. He has long decried the fact that of the \$40 million in UDAG loans the city has received since 1987, 75 percent went to help only six major corporations. He hopes to see supermarkets, movie theaters, shopping complexes and the like return to downtown over the next several years.

The most frequent advice Sills has been



The fervor of Sills' supporters, such as Doris Tounds, left, and Cheron Caldwell, was everywhere apparent on election night at the victory celebration.

know Jim Sills," he says. "[Sills] is not pro one section over another section. He's pro city. He feels the city has a critical role to play in the economy of the whole state."

"There is no black agenda," Peuquet says. "The issues that concern African Americans are by and large the concerns that affect all areas of the community — the economy, education and the quality of life."

No one in the top echelons of the Frawley administration, including the outgoing mayor himself, agreed to discuss specifically how they feel Sills will fare in the job as mayor, which pays \$70,000 annually. But some were willing to talk generally, off-the-record. Several say that the rap on Sills about being indecisive could prove to be very damaging to him in the mayor's office.

For one thing, they say, the city could soon find itself in serious financial trouble if Sills doesn't quickly move to raise taxes after he takes office. Financial analysts expect the city to face a revenue deficit of somewhere between about \$3 million and \$5 million of the annual \$100 million budget by the time Sills is inaugurated. Some in the Frawley administration say that Sills must raise taxes almost immediately to deal with the problem.

If Sills won't raise taxes, he will probably have to either cut some city services or resort to layoffs. Exacerbating this problem, they point out, is the fact that not long after Sills assumes office the contracts of four of the city's most powerful public employees unions will come up for renewal. The unions will be out to test Sills immediately, they say.

The three-year contract for the city's blue-collar workers carries a Dec. 31, 1992,

first undertaken to revitalize the city's rapidly fading downtown business section. Without thriving downtown business and restaurant activity to lend year-round

getting since his election is that he make his appointments to key city posts on the basis of merit alone — because he is going

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HARMON CAREY SAYS:

SILLS IS TENACIOUS AND TOUGH

Harmon Carey remembers that Jim Sills was always one to see things through, no matter what. Carey along with Sills and five or six other young men, such as Lennie Williams, now a Municipal Court judge, hung around together on the city's East Side when they weren't working.

The group did things together, such as fishing, swimming and attending social events back in the '60s. Carey recalls a time the group went to Elk Neck State Park, not far from North East, Md., to do some swimming. At the shore of the broad Elk River, they challenged each other to a race to the far side.

They all jumped in and began swimming furiously. But before too long they started dropping out from exhaustion, and heading back to the near shore. "One by one we gave up and started back — all except Jim," says Carey. "Jim kept going, and after a while his arms weren't moving too fast, but he wouldn't quit. It took about two hours, but he finally made the other shore."

"And I'll tell you what, he's a terrible tennis player," continues Carey. "But Jim will never give up, no matter how bad he's getting beat. That's what makes him so special."

extremely hard worker, he's known for putting in long hours, seven days a week. His wife Evelyn admits that she can seldom convince him to take part in one of his favorite leisure activities, fresh water fishing. "He's a voracious reader. And even when he falls asleep, he has a note pad at his side so when he wakes up he can write any ideas that have come to him," says Evelyn Sills.

Other strong points mentioned include his honesty, integrity, determination, intelligence and mental toughness, as well as a genuine concern for people generally.

"Jim is a bottoms-up leader. He's built his reputation on one-to-one relationships," says Steve Peuquet, director of the College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy's Urban Agent Division at the University of Delaware. Sills was instrumental in founding the forerunner of the Urban Agent Division in the early '70s.

But there are those who say also that they see some weaker aspects that Sills will have to work on to be at his most effective

in the extremely demanding job that awaits him. Although most will agree that he is an able administrator, some question the strength of his organizational skills.

Some feel that Sills' penchant for slow, deliberate evaluation before making important decisions could be a hindrance in a job that often requires decisive reaction to crisis situations. Others wonder if Sills will be able to form a city-wide coalition of residents and their leaders — which they believe he will surely need to do in order to govern effectively.

Harmon Carey of Wilmington, a long-

Jim Sills' characteristic self-confidence was discernable even as a 12-year-old in his native North Carolina.



RALPH MORRIS SAYS:

SILLS REMAINS TRUE TO HIS ROOTS

Ralph Morris is sure that no matter what action Jill Sills takes as the new mayor of Wilmington, it will be well thought-out. "Jim has just the right amount of caution, before he does anything important," says Morris.

Now 72 and a resident of East Side Wilmington, Morris has been a long-time publisher of black-oriented community publications there. He and Sills first met in the late 1960s when Sills was executive director of the Association of Greater Wilmington Neighborhoods Centers. Sills hired Morris to head up the then newly established United Neighbors for Progress, a neighborhood self-help group. They have been close friends ever since, Morris says.

He believes that Sills will turn out to be a champion of the "little guy" in Wilmington, because Sills has never left the working-class East Side area where he started out.

"Jim's a [university] professor and all that. He could live anywhere, but look where he stayed and raised his family. Jim's degreed, and a lot of people in the minority community tend to be wary of people like this. But Jim has a real positive image with the people around here," says Morris.

time professional associate and friend of Sills, says Sills may seek too much advice. But finally, Sills makes up his own mind and then he's a tough customer. "Even if he makes the wrong decision, he does it because he believes he's doing the right thing," adds Carey.

And if Sills does have a particular weak point, his wife thinks it may be this: "Jim sometimes trusts

people a little too much. He believes in everyone. But he's been lucky so far. This has never seriously backfired on him yet."

Is Wilmington ready for a black mayor? Preceding the primary election, Sills told Delaware Today that he didn't see any problem with his ability to relate positively with every segment of the Wilmington community. He says his record over the past several decades as community worker, educator and legislator has conclusively demonstrated this.

And since his election, Sills' ability to put together a mostly blue chip, ethnically and racially mixed administrative transition team, has brought him good marks from many community leaders. (But Sills did take some heat from a few City Council members for the unprecedented \$40,000 the city will have to shell out to support the team's activities.)

Also, a group of the city's top corporate

IS SILLS UP TO THE JOB? SOME INSIDERS HAVE A SAY

Jim Sills could be walking into an economic buzz saw when he takes the oath as Wilmington's newest mayor. But if that's the way it's going to be, he just might be the best person to handle the situation right now.

This appears to be the consensus expressed by several authorities in economics, finance and administration who have particular insight into the workings of Wilmington government.

Most of these experts who spoke to Delaware Today about Sills feel that his lack of experience in the hands-on running of a fair-sized city, coupled with Wilmington's looming budgetary and other problems, could present stiff challenges to the new mayor.

On the other hand few, if any, felt that Sills was not up to the job. All found significant strong points in Sills character and background that they feel will make him equal, at least, to the task ahead. Here are the high points from several of these interviews.



Harry Haskell, who was mayor of Wilmington from 1969 to 1973 and the only Republican to hold the office since the middle 1950s, wishes the new Democratic mayor well. But he sees some areas that could spell trouble for the yet-to-be tested Sills. "He'll need all the help from the community that he can get," says Haskell.

Haskell concurs with Sills that the city's first economic priority should be rebuilding the downtown section's business and entertainment infrastructure. "We don't even have a movie theater downtown," says Haskell. "We need one of those 12-screen jobs."

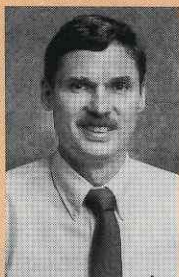
Not all of Wilmington's business leaders share Sills' view on this. "But others [in business] are for it, out of pure frustration," says Haskell, a business magnate with close ties to the du Pont family and who maintains offices in downtown Wilmington.

Sills' character is an important factor, says Haskell. "He's honest and that is critical — that's 80 percent of what you're after in a public servant. I personally like Jim — his wife and his family. And he's not going to have an easy time of it, with this drug overlay problem that I didn't have [as mayor]."

John Stapleford, director of the Bureau of Economic Research at the University of Delaware, believes that Sills has grown professionally over the past several years to a point where he is now ready for the complexities faced in high public office.

"As compared to 15 years ago, let's say, Jim is much more aware of the fact that this is a world of limited resources and not a bottomless pit of money — even for good causes," says Stapleford, a highly regarded authority on the Delaware economy.

"Being in the General Assembly was an eye-opener for Sills, and it gave him a chance to grow," says Stapleford. "He [Sills] isn't going in naive now. He knows the idea now is to be a good steward for the city," adds Stapleford, who serves as an economic adviser on the new mayor's transition team.



Dave Swayze, a principal in the Wilmington law firm of Duane, Morris & Hecksher and a board member of the New Castle County Economic Development Corporation, says that Sills is coming into office at a time when Wilmington is confronting a most difficult financial crunch with a period of a continuing recession.

One of Sills' most pressing problems will be that Wilmington is perceived as a less competitive place to live and work than in any other major Delaware jurisdiction — in terms of taxation. "The city's tax structure is compared negatively to New Castle, Kent and Sussex counties. So Jim will have an extraordinary challenge, compounded by the current [city budget] deficit — not to mention the projected revenue decline for 1993," says Swayze.

"Jim has to confront this right away, but he is the right man for the job. There are several necessary skills for this job — a thorough and creative mind and a real grasp of public policy issues. Jim has that. His understanding of the way the General Assembly works is critical because he will need significant participation [financial assistance] from Dover," adds Swayze, who served for several years as Gov. Mike Castle's legal counsel.

Allen Rusten, a nationally recognized expert in state and local government operations, says Sills is coming into the mayor's office in the same year as the city will be feeling the full negative financial impact of the recession.

"It will be tough for Jim to mount new programs with the need for the city to keep a bare-bones government functioning. It will be very difficult for all the new people coming in to the Sills administration," says Rusten, who was Mayor Haskell's chief administrative officer in 1973.

Now operating his own governmental counseling firm, Rusten Associates in North Wilmington, Rusten says Sills must surround himself with the best people he can find, particularly financial experts. In the meantime, he says, don't expect any early miracles from the Sills administration.

"It would be unrealistic to expect a whole bunch of new economic initiatives in the city right now," says Rusten.

Marvin "Skip" Schoenhals is among the many Wilmington bankers who have come to put a great deal of trust in Sills' ability to get things done. "Jim will be very good for the city. He's committed to economic vitality for all parts of the city, and that's good for all of us," says Schoenhals, who was brought in two years ago to take over as president of the then-financially ailing Wilmington Savings Fund Society.

Schoenhals has worked closely with Sills since coming here — primarily with Sills' efforts to make loans and mortgages from city-based banking institutions more readily available to the inner-city residents who are their neighbors. WSFS is among the three banks that originally signed contracts with Sills' Delaware Community Reinvestment Action Council to help achieve this end.

"I've found Jim to be very straightforward. He can work with many diverse groups of people, and that's good. He has a vision of what he wants to accomplish for Wilmington and he has the ability to motivate people to help accomplish this."

