

Honoring The Honorable Bill Dover

Remarks by Chairman Bruce Harkness

Habersham County Board of Commissioners

OPENING REMARKS (*Core Section*)

Good evening, everyone.

It is my privilege to welcome all of you as we gather to recognize a man whose life's work has left an enduring mark on Habersham County, the State of Georgia, and the lives of countless people along the way.

Tonight, we honor **The Honorable Bill Dover**.

There are people who spend their lives pursuing success, and there are those who spend their lives pursuing service. Bill Dover chose service.

His legacy is not defined simply by the offices he held or the laws he passed. It is defined by the people whose lives are better because he chose to serve. Tonight, we celebrate that legacy.

A HABERSHAM COUNTY BEGINNING (*Core Section*)

Every great story begins somewhere, and Bill's begins right here in Habersham County.

Born in 1945 to Ernest and Louise Dover, Bill grew up on family land in Hollywood that has been in the Dover family for generations, dating back to his great-great-great-grandfather, Francis John Dover. In fact, we've discovered there may even be a family connection between the Dover family and my own Harkness family, which makes tonight's recognition even more meaningful.

Bill attended Habersham County schools, spent time at Tallulah Falls School, and graduated from Piedmont College. While at Piedmont, he met and married Suzanne Wynston Knight of Clarkesville.

Bill has often said that whatever success he achieved throughout his life would not have been possible without Suzanne. She became his greatest supporter, his closest advisor, and, in his own words, his most trusted confidant.

After college, Bill volunteered to serve in the United States Army. Although he had two brothers already serving in Vietnam, he chose to answer the call himself and served on the Korean Demilitarized Zone.

Those early experiences—as a son of Habersham County, as a soldier, and later as a teacher and school administrator—shaped a lifelong belief that public service was one of life's highest callings.

ANSWERING THE CALL TO SERVE *(Core Section)*

After returning home, Bill devoted himself to education, teaching at North Habersham Junior High School, serving in school administration, and later returning to the classroom as the Alternative School teacher during breaks from legislative service.

But he felt called to serve in another way.

At just twenty-six years old, he ran for the Georgia House of Representatives. He lost.

Many people would have stopped there.

Bill Dover didn't.

Two years later, at only twenty-eight years old, he ran again and earned the trust of the people.

That trust would continue for decades.

Election after election, often facing determined opposition, the citizens continued sending Bill Dover back to Atlanta because they knew exactly who he worked for—not political parties, not special interests, but the people of Northeast Georgia.

In fact, Bill Dover served as Habersham County's representative longer than anyone else since the county was established in 1821. That is an extraordinary distinction and a testament to the confidence the people placed in him throughout his career.

CHAMPIONING EDUCATION *(Core Section)*

Education remained one of Bill's greatest passions throughout his life.

As a teacher, he understood that investing in children was really an investment in the future of our communities.

That belief shaped many of his proudest accomplishments.

Working alongside Senator John Foster, Bill helped make homeschooling legal in Georgia, giving families educational choices that had never before existed under state law.

He also worked tirelessly to strengthen education right here in Habersham County by establishing an alcohol tax dedicated exclusively to education and later helping secure a constitutional amendment that guarantees an additional one-percent sales tax dedicated to our local school system.

Knowing those revenues continue supporting students today remains one of the accomplishments of which he is most proud.

Bill also believed parents should have a direct voice in their children's education, leading the effort to change the Habersham County Board of Education from an appointed board to one elected by the people.

Whether standing in a classroom or beneath the Gold Dome, Bill Dover never stopped believing in the power of education to change lives.

PROTECTING THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA (*Core Section*)

Bill believed that government existed to improve people's lives.

Perhaps no accomplishment better demonstrates that than his work creating Conservation Use Valuation.

For years, family farms and forests were threatened by rising property taxes. Bill spent much of his legislative career fighting to ensure that families could continue owning the land they loved without being taxed out of it.

Because of that perseverance, countless farms, forests, streams, and mountains throughout Georgia remain protected today.

He also championed tax relief for elderly and disabled citizens, ensuring many Georgians could remain in their homes with greater financial security.

One story that perfectly captures Bill's determination involves Highway 365.

When plans were developed to extend the highway, Bill realized students traveling to Habersham Central High School would face a dangerous intersection every day. Transportation officials repeatedly told him there wasn't enough money to build a bridge.

Bill refused to accept that answer.

He made it clear that if the Department of Transportation wouldn't fund the project, he would seek funding through the legislature.

Eventually, those bridges became reality.

Today, thousands of students have crossed them safely because one legislator refused to stop fighting for his community.

He also worked to ensure that firefighters' families received the same statewide death benefits as law enforcement officers. Following the tragic loss of Habersham firefighter Sam Pitts, Bill helped secure funding that allowed the City of Clarkesville to purchase the land that became Pitts Park—a lasting tribute to a local hero.

LEADERSHIP THAT REACHED FAR BEYOND HABERSHAM *(Optional Section)*

Bill's leadership eventually extended far beyond the boundaries of Habersham County.

As Chairman of the Georgia House Ways and Means Committee, he helped shape tax policy for the entire state while contributing to the fiscal stewardship that helped Georgia maintain its AAA bond rating.

He also served on numerous influential committees, including Education, Appropriations, State Planning, Game and Fish, Health and Ecology, Industrial Relations, and the MARTA Board.

Bill believed government should always work for the people.

He successfully reformed the handling of county tax revenues so public money earned interest for taxpayers rather than remaining in private accounts, and he helped make government more accessible by requiring county tax commissioners' offices to offer Saturday hours for working citizens.

He also played important roles in creating the Habersham County Industrial Authority and assisting both Clarkesville and Tallulah Falls in modernizing their municipal charters.

RESPECTED BEYOND GEORGIA *(Optional Section)*

Bill Dover's reputation for thoughtful public policy eventually reached beyond our state—and even beyond our nation.

In 1990, as the Soviet Union sought guidance in transitioning toward a free-market economy, Bill was selected to travel to Moscow on behalf of The Coca-Cola Company to help advise Soviet leaders on tax policy and the role taxation plays in a democratic government.

While there, he attended a State Dinner hosted by Mikhail Gorbachev.

He also collaborated with the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in England on public education research.

For a young man who grew up on family land in Hollywood, Georgia, these opportunities speak volumes about the respect he earned as one of the nation's leading legislative experts on tax policy.

THE MEASURE OF THE MAN (*Core Section*)

As remarkable as Bill Dover's accomplishments are, they do not fully explain why he is so highly respected.

That answer is much simpler.

He cared about people.

He helped people find jobs.

He helped people keep jobs.

He answered phone calls at every hour of the day and night.

In fact, one family from Habersham County called him around two o'clock one morning because loved ones were trapped in Lebanon and feared for their lives.

Bill immediately contacted United States Senator Max Cleland and asked for help.

Within twenty-four hours, that family was safely back home.

That wasn't simply politics.

That was public service.

When Bill reflects on his career, he doesn't begin by talking about legislation.

He says his success rests on three things:

His faith in God.

His wife, Suzanne.

And the constituents he had the privilege of serving.

I think that tells us everything we need to know about the man we honor tonight.

CLOSING TRIBUTE (*Core Section*)

Bill, your fingerprints can still be found across Habersham County and throughout the State of Georgia.

They can be found in family farms that remain in family hands.

In forests that continue to stand.

In schools that continue to benefit from the funding you helped secure.

In bridges that safely carry thousands of young drivers each day.

In firefighters' families who received the protection they deserved.

In parents who gained the freedom to educate their children at home.

And in countless citizens whose lives were quietly changed because you took the time to answer the phone, listen, and help.

There are public officials who are remembered because of the office they held.

Others are remembered because of a single piece of legislation.

Bill Dover will be remembered because, for decades, whenever the people of Habersham County needed someone to fight for them, they knew exactly who to call.

On behalf of the Habersham County Board of Commissioners and the grateful citizens of Habersham County, thank you for your extraordinary lifetime of service.

Your legacy is measured not only in the laws you passed, but in the lives you touched, the opportunities you created, and the community you helped strengthen.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in recognizing and thanking **The Honorable Bill Dover**.