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Charlotte arts patron honored

STEVEN BROWN

After more than 40 years of working behind the scenes to support the arts, Charlotte attorney Jim Preston landed in the spotlight Wednesday when he was awarded the state's highest honor, the Order of the Long Leaf Pine.

Anyone who didn't grasp the award's importance could have gotten the idea from the gasp that went up from the roomful of arts backers when the announcement was made. Preston, who hadn't known what was in store, showed his reaction on his face -- with a flinch of surprise.

The Order of the Long Leaf Pine goes to residents "who have a proven record of service to the state," the state's description says. It's awarded by the governor, but Gov. Mike Easley wasn't at Wednesday's presentation.

Preston was nominated by the Greater Charlotte Cultural Trust, an arts endowment established by the Arts & Science Council and the Foundation for the Carolinas.

The groups' nomination highlights Preston's work in getting an array of Charlotte cultural groups -- and a battery of attorneys representing them -- to agree on the legal setup of an fundraising endowment benefiting all of them.

Accomplishing that illustrates Preston's ability to "bring people together and make them focus on the common good," said Mark Bernstein, who has long worked alongside Preston as an arts backer and as an attorney for Parker Poe Adams & Bernstein.

The endowment now holds \$135 million, the ASC says.

Preston, born in 1937, is a graduate of the University of North Carolina and its law school. His decades of work in the cultural scene include stints as president of the Community School of the Arts in the 1970s, president of the Arts & Science Council in the 1980s, and board member of N.C. Dance Theatre in the 1990s. In his professional work, he has served as president of the N.C. State Bar and as a member of the American Bar Association's House of Delegates.

Wednesday's ceremony also included a state honor for Pat Riley, another longtime arts backer and the president of Allen Tate Realtors. Riley received the Old North State Award.