

Clemson Mayor Larry Abernathy dies



City of Clemson Mayor Larry Abernathy welcomes audience members to a ceremony in September 2011.

By [Mike Ellis](#) of the *Independent Mail*

Larry Abernathy fell in love with Clemson University in 1965 as a student and stayed true for the rest of his life.

With an undergraduate degree and two master's degrees from the school, he was elected to the Clemson City Council while still a student and served as mayor beginning in 1984.

He died Saturday at age 64.

Mayor Pro Tem Butch Trent, a close friend of Abernathy, will assume the duties of the mayor until a new mayor can be selected.

Abernathy died at Greenville Memorial Hospital around 1:15 p.m. Saturday of natural causes, said Pickens County Coroner Kandy Kelley.

Trent said his friend's health had deteriorated in the past two years with diabetic complications and heart problems. Friends and family were hopeful Abernathy would recover. He fell in his home Monday, broke his arm and was admitted to Greenville Memorial.

Abernathy was a counselor who worked with drug and alcohol addicts, running treatment agencies in Oconee and Anderson counties for decades. He also was a visiting assistant professor of counselor education and clinical/mental health in the College of Health, Education and Human Development at Clemson University. Trent said Abernathy was teaching as of two weeks ago.

"It's a sad day for me," Trent said Saturday. "My heart is broken. He's a good friend of mine."

He said Abernathy's accomplishments would fill books, but among other things he helped found organizations and facilities including the Littlejohn Community Center, Clemson Community Care and the Clemson Free Clinic.

Abernathy was instrumental in starting "town and gown" initiatives that joined the university and city populations in Clemson and earned national awards.

As mayor, he led an ultimately successful effort to keep Wal-Mart out of Clemson.

He was not known for political fights, but his opposition to the Confederate flag led to some drawn-out battles.

The Clemson Area Transit system, which now serves more than 1.6 million riders a year, began operation under his tenure. The opening of the South Carolina's first energy-efficient transit center happened in November 2011 in Clemson. The \$3 million Clemson Area Transit building houses administrative offices for the bus system that links Pickens, Anderson and Oconee counties.

Abernathy had said in recent years that he was frustrated by the general appearance of portals into the city that contain burned buildings and unfinished demolition projects. He said he wanted city officials to work to determine the best course of action to spur completion of projects.

The mayor was a powerhouse behind recent initiatives to ban smoking and ban cell phone texting while driving in the city, said Tim Fowler, a city council member.

Abernathy was an active fly-fisher and rode motorcycles across the country until losing his leg to diabetic complications in 2007.

Known for his irreverent sense of humor, Abernathy was a fan of blues music and of air guitar riffs.

He was a major force behind Nothin' But the BluesFest, a four-day music event planned for April this year in the Clemson area. Abernathy frequently offered advice to the committee formed to plan the event and helped secure funding to make it possible.

Anderson Mayor Terence Roberts said he saw Abernathy last week.

Downtown revitalization in Clemson and the strength of the town's relationship with Clemson University were two things that Roberts said stood out.

"He understood the makeup of his community, with students and retired people coming to his community," Roberts said. "He understood how to leverage those two segments of the population into a very vibrant town."

Clemson University President James Barker said, "Larry Abernathy was my Clemson classmate, my partner in serving this community and my dear friend. Larry was the personification of the term public service. His untiring commitment to this city and university, his strong belief in collaboration, and his progressive leadership helped make Clemson one of the nation's best college towns and a national model for positive town-gown relations. He will be sorely missed."

Clemson City Council member J.C. Cook said of Abernathy, "It has been a hard couple of years, healthwise, for him. It was still a shock to us. He has been very instrumental in just about everything in Clemson for decades."

Cook and Abernathy knew each other through the college in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their daughters were best friends as well.

"It was too short of a time," Cook said.

Carol Burdette, president of the United Way of Anderson County and former mayor of Pendleton, said she first met Abernathy 25 years ago right after she was elected to Pendleton Town Council.

"He was just a wonderful person, and he will be missed greatly," Burdette said. "His leadership and his love for his community will be missed."

She said Clemson and Pendleton have worked together on multiple projects over the years, just a few examples being involvement with the CAT system and a wastewater treatment plant that both municipalities use.

"He was always such a gentleman, such a public servant with his heart in the right place," Burdette said.

South Carolina State Sen. Larry Martin, a Pickens Republican, said Abernathy "was a very dedicated and conscientious mayor for the city of Clemson."

"He was very proud of the work that Clemson and other municipalities were doing for the benefit of their local citizens," Martin said.

Independent Mail correspondent Vince Jackson contributed to this report.