Clemson's success unusual

City enjoys economic growth, partnerships

BY GREG OLIVER
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CLEMSON — When it comes to small cities, few can say they've enjoyed Clemson's success.


Abernathy

The city enjoys a strong relationship with Clemson University (CU), a fact displayed by its recent Princeton Review top town-gown national ranking.

Additionally, new construction is taking place in the midst of the worst recession in recent memory, a testament to Clemson's ability to not only survive, but also thrive, during times of economic peril.

"What's important to note is that a lot of towns our size are struggling to maintain, and a lot of things don't happen," said Mayor Larry Abernathy. "But since we're an education-driven city, we're somewhat recession-proof. Kids keep coming to Clemson University and keep having dollars to spend,

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and we certainly benefit from that."

That relationship with CU has certainly borne much fruit through the years, including the implementation of Clemson Area Transit Service (CAT) in 1996 and its subsequent growth into Central, Pendleton, Anderson and, most recently, Seneca.

But Abernathy said the city's relationship with the university is also due to what he describes as "a visionary City Council."

"We have had a long history of councils that were visionary and staff people, like (City Administrator) Rick (Cotton), who were visually able to look 5, 10, 15, 20 years into the future and determine things that, while they may not be popular at the time, would pay off for us in grand fashion. And, they have," Abernathy said.

Economic development is another key to the success enjoyed by the city of Clemson. While the recession has clamped down elsewhere, Clemson has witnessed the opening of Walgreens, Chick-fil-A and a Holiday Inn Express, as well as the upcoming opening of Courtyard by Marriott.

More growth may be on the way. For example, the Freedom Drive redevelopment commercial project — which will be anchored by Publix — is nearing final plan approval; Lowe's Home Improvement remains under construction; Patrick Square has four new homes nearing completion and others ready for startup; and new downtown restaurants include Brioso, Shish-Ka-Bobs, El Jimador and the remodeling of the old Mo Joes/Baskin Robbins into a new, larger eatery.

When it comes to infrastructure, the city will also realize a longtime goal next year when the College Avenue widening and bridge replacement project begins. The project will greatly improve traffic flow at the intersection of S.C. 133 and Tiger Boulevard.

Abernathy said the city is working feverishly to address eyesores, including the former Lake Hartwell Inn on U.S. 123, the Astro Triple movie theatre that has sat vacant since closing in August 2008 and the Tower Place condos project that produced a building that was never occupied.

"There're a few structures left that are still eyesores, but there's not much ugly left in Clemson, not much at all," Abernathy said.

Though pleased with the economic development that has taken place, city officials refuse to sit still. Plans for a new independent/assisted living center are progressing, and Abernathy said he remains hopeful that some type of medical facility can become a reality in the near

future. Also on the mayor's wish list is the relocation of the post office — whose College Avenue location creates traffic and safety concerns, more development of the lower end of downtown and a continued emphasis on making the city more environmentally friendly, or "green."

Clemson City Hall is being expanded and a contract will be awarded Dec. 7 for construction of the new CAT office on West Lane starting in January.

Clemson isn't just about economic development, but also about serving others. The city's assistance in seeing a new Clemson Community Care (CCC) facility open on U.S. Highway 76 more than five years ago and the relocation of the Clemson Child Development Center to the Calhoun Bridge Center three years ago come to mind.

"We appreciate our relationship with the city so much," said Child Development Center Executive Director Karen Ellers. "Because of a grant received by the city five years ago, we have our building from which we have been able to expand our services to the community. The city is responsive to the needs we have as an agency, including maintenance and assistance with pick ups, and the departments we work with are exceptionally receptive and helpful to our client needs."

"We are fortunate enough in this town and so blessed that people are willing to step forward to work really hard to make it work," Abernathy said. "After all, The Clemson Free Clinic was once a pipe dream.

"If you have a decent idea and float it out to the community, they'll do it."

With the present and future economic growth of Clemson, its proximity to Clemson University, the 11 parks that exist in the city, recent landscaping led by the city's full-time horticulturist Tim Johnson and the ability to assist not-for-profit organizations, it's no wonder the city was named one of the Top 10 retirement destinations in the country by "Where to Retire" magazine in 2006.

Next: The city's relationship with Central that resulted in the Indoor Rec Center and other partnerships.

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Larry Abernathy
Clemson mayor