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S.C. Sen. Ray Cleary, R-Murrells Inlet, said Wednesday he would not be seeking a fourth term in 2016, and plans to focus more on his dental practice and family.

Cleary, whose District 34 covers Horry, Georgetown and Charleston counties, told The Sun News on Wednesday he planned to publicly announce his intentions early next week, but word spread quicker through the community than he thought it would.

"Even though it appeared that nobody's ever run against me, I'm a firm believer in term limits," Cleary said. "The longer I've been in the Senate, and the longer I've been in politics, the more important I think term limits are."

Cleary's term ends in 2016, but he said he wanted to announce early to allow for potential candidates to think about it and begin campaigning.

"I told people I thought Senator [Glenn] McConnell and Sen. Yancey McGill were great senators, but they were replaced by people who work hard, and I know I'll be replaced by somebody who will work hard. I think it's a good opportunity to move forward a little bit."

Cleary said his accomplishments include introducing the first bill to address autism. He also raised the maximum amount for bankruptcies from \$5,000 to \$50,000 per individual and \$100,000 per couple. Cleary said he's proud he worked on getting raffles for organizations to raise funds out to the voters through referendum and into law.

Cleary said he takes pride in teaming with other legislators to get Horry-Georgetown Technical College and Coastal Carolina University additional funding.

"I really feel like I accomplished some things, but it really takes an effort of everybody," Cleary said. "You just have to have

good relationships, and I feel like I've made some friends up there, which has allowed me to be successful."

Sen. Luke Rankin said Cleary's retirement will leave a void in the area.

"He's been an incredible ally and advocate for our area on multiple fronts, from the little to the big," Rankin said. "He's been a very, very engaged and active ally who has tackled tough challenges with great personal skill and the right touch.

"From mental health issues to highway funding, across the gamut of issues, his sense of humor and his right touch was often times the right way to work with people. It's going to be a big void for our area, particularly with him on the finance committee.

Cleary said the job can take up to three days per week, which can be tiring when the trek to Columbia is included.

"It's more difficult when you're three hours away like we are," he said.

Cleary has recently served on the finance, education and medical affairs committees while in the senate.

"I feel very fortunate that I was awarded the legislator of the year award by an environmental group a couple years ago," Cleary said. "I feel that I represented our area with integrity and hard work and dedication. Even if people probably disagreed with some of my positions, especially on maybe how we should fund roads, at least I always listened to them and told them why I may disagree or agree.

"I feel like I listened to both sides and tried to follow the opinion that best represents the 103,000 people I represent."