

Melville mayor, up for reelection, killed in Election Day crash | Crime/Police

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BY KATIE GAGLIANO | Staff writer, Katie Gagliano

November 8, 2022



Melville Mayor Velma Hendrix was killed Tuesday in a vehicle crash.

Hendrix, 84, was a longtime St. Landry Parish educator and was first elected Melville's mayor in 2018, winning 70% of the vote. She previously served on the town's board of alderman, serving in the mid-1990s to early 2000s and again before she was elected to her mayoral post, according to Louisiana Secretary of State records.

Hendrix was running for reelection against challengers Sheila "Sam" Londerno and Caretta Robertson in Tuesday's election.

The 84-year-old was riding in a 2008 Acura RDX on U.S. 190 when the SUV was struck by a 2015 Ram 2500 pickup just after 11 a.m. The truck's driver, Michael Cook of Columbia, Louisiana, was driving south on La. 741 and attempted to cross both of U.S. 190's westbound lanes, but struck the Acura on the passenger side as it entered the intersection.

Hendrix was not wearing a seatbelt at the time of the crash and was taken to a local hospital in critical condition, where she died from her injuries, Louisiana State Police Trooper Thomas Gossen said in a statement.

The Acura's driver and three other passengers suffered moderate to critical injuries and were taken to local hospitals for treatment. The driver was restrained, but it's unknown whether the other passengers were wearing seatbelts, he said.

Cook was not wearing a seatbelt but was uninjured. He did not show signs of impairment and submitted a breath sample that showed no alcohol in his system. He was cited for failure to yield from a stop sign and not wearing a seat belt. A routine toxicology sample was collected from the Acura's driver for analysis, Gossen said.

St. Landry Parish President Jessie Bellard said Hendrix was a "nice lady" and was well loved in the community. The parish president spoke with Londerno and a local business owner who said Hendrix's sudden passing has stunned the small town.

"Speaking to the people in that area they're just shocked," he said. "It's tragic. The community is a small community and they're mourning the loss of their mayor."

The parish government had recently been working with Hendrix and her administration to improve the town's financial situation.

St. Landry Parish Clerk of Court Charles Jagneaux spoke to state Commissioner of Elections Sherri Wharton Hadskey and said because Hendrix died before voting closed, qualifying for candidates will be reopened once the state receives official notification from the St. Landry Parish Coroner's Office confirming Hendrix's death. Qualifying will close on Monday, he said.

If a new candidate qualifies, a new election will be held on Dec. 10, Jagneaux said.

Londerno earned over 51% of the vote after the total was amended to remove the 70 votes cast for Hendrix from the calculation, according to the Louisiana Secretary of State's website. Prior to the adjustment, Londerno had netted 43% of the vote, and Caretta scored 40%.

If the new qualifying period closes without a new candidate entering the race, Londerno will be Melville's next mayor.

John Tobler, spokesperson for the Secretary of State's Office, said the votes for Hendrix were removed from the results calculation because state law dictates they not be weighted in the decision of the race since Hendrix is no longer living.