

UPTOWN

a publication of the Municipal Association of South Carolina

PLANNING PUBLIC FACILITIES FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE GROWTH

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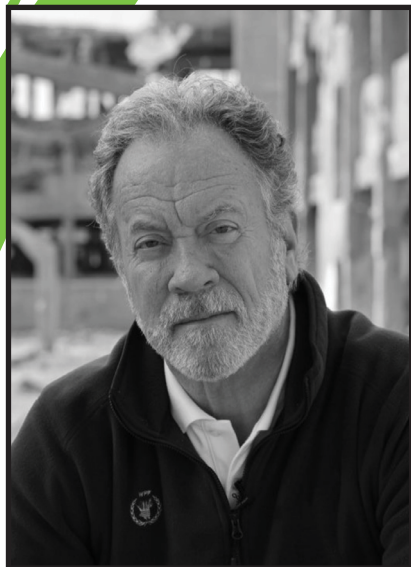
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Cover Photo: The Simpsonville Municipal Complex, opened in late 2024, houses the city hall and police department. The complex is also the home of Gracely Park, the fire department and a building for both county court and city court. Photo: City of Simpsonville.

ANNUAL MEETING

to Feature Former Gov. Beasley, Breakout Sessions



The 2025 Annual Meeting of the Municipal Association of SC, taking place on Hilton Head Island July 16 – 20, will take a look at the impact that the state's cities and towns have for their residents and businesses — making communities safer, more prosperous and more livable.

Municipal leaders will be invited to share the impact their governments are having in their community with the Municipal Association's *City Quick Connect* podcast, and the Association will also debut the IMPACT Fund grants. More information on these is available on page 14.

The Honorable David Beasley will deliver the keynote address on Friday, July 18. Beasley, who served in the SC House of Representatives

and then as governor of South Carolina from 1995 to 1999, became the executive director of the United Nations World Food Programme from 2017 to 2023.

Beasley's address will explore the dynamics of global order, including war, conflict, paths to stability and the impact of the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2020, Beasley accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the World Food Programme for its efforts to combat hunger internationally.

The opening general session, including the recognition of Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government graduates, will take place at a new time this year — Thursday afternoon, July 17 at 3:45 p.m., rather than on Friday morning.

Concurrent sessions, where attendees break out into one of a couple of sessions several times during the Municipal Association's Annual Meeting, give city and town leaders options for learning more about many topics relevant to their communities. Here are the concurrent session options:

Friday, July 18

1:30 p.m. sessions

- **Effectively Communicating With Your Legislators** – Communicating with legislators can be intimidating, especially when it's about confusing and controversial topics. Join the Municipal Association legislative team along with members of the General Assembly to learn about tips and tricks in developing relationships with legislators and getting your point across with kindness.
- **Unlocking Growth: Attracting Remote Talent to Your Municipality** – Understanding how to attract remote workers seeking a high quality of life can help position a city for growth. This session will explore the Town of Cheraw's successful model and provides municipal officials with the tools to implement similar strategies.

NEWS BRIEFS

Members of the SC Community Development Association elected their 2025 – 2026 board of directors. They include President **Angela Kirkpatrick**, Town of Summerville; Vice President **Jessi Shuler**, Town of Summerville; and Secretary **Kim Ethridge**, Pee Dee Council of Governments. New members at large are **Nate Foutch**, SC Rural Infrastructure Authority; **Sydney Kinard**, Lowcountry Council of Governments; and **Madison Workman**, Town of Lyman. Returning members at large are **Nicholle Burroughs**, Town of Chapin; **Jill Charlton**, Appalachian Council of Governments; **Joe Smith**, Greenville County Redevelopment Authority; and **Kimberly Varn**, Lowcountry Council of Governments. The past president is **Doug Polen**, Town of Irmo.

The SC Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism announced \$7.8 million in grants for numerous parks projects across the state to receive funding from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund for the 2024 cycle. These include the **City of Belton** for Leda Poore Park, the **Town of Cheraw** for an Arrowhead Park splash pad, the **Town of Edisto Beach** for the Jungle Shores Drive bike path resurfacing, the **City of Greenville** for a Cleveland Park playground replacement, the **Town of Edgefield** for Dixie Youth Baseball Complex improvements, the **City of Lake City** for a Blanding Street Park restroom facility and pathway lights, the **Town of McBee** for the McBee Recreational Complex, the **Town of Moncks Corner** for Dr. William H. Lacey Park, the **Town of Ridgeland** for trail development, the **City of Spartanburg** for Duncan Park, and the **City of Walterboro** for Walterboro Wildlife Sanctuary boardwalks.

The *USA Today* 10Best Readers' Choice Awards has named the Soda City Market in the **City of Columbia** the best farmers market in the nation.

2:30 p.m. sessions

- **Gun Violence Reduction: The City of Columbia Success Story** – In 2024, Columbia experienced a dramatic 40% decrease in fatal and non-fatal shootings — the lowest number of shootings in a decade. In this session, hear from Chief Skip Holbrook on the lessons learned and the various strategies used to achieve this significant reduction in gun violence.
- **USC Brain Health: Community Based-Partners for Cognitive Care and Support** – The University of South Carolina's Brain Health is a team of experts dedicated to screening, evaluating and managing memory loss. Join Brain Health's Executive Director Brad Cole and former Sen. Katrina Shealy, the community outreach coordinator, to learn how cities and towns can partner with Brain Health in making municipalities more friendly to those suffering from memory loss and their caretakers.

Saturday, July 19

9:00 a.m. sessions

- **Retail Rivalry: Perfecting Your Pitch to Compete for New Commercial Development** – Attracting top retailers and restaurants requires more than just available space — it demands a compelling pitch that sets a community apart. Join Charles Parker, project director at The Retail Coach, as he shares proven strategies to help local leaders craft winning pitches that resonate with site selectors, developers and brokers. Read an article from Parker on retail competitiveness on page 15.
- **Critical Court Cases Impacting Local Government** – Get a rapid-fire update on recent federal and state court case decisions that affect local government from Municipal Association General Counsel Eric Shytle.

10:00 a.m. sessions

- **New Grant Possibilities: Shifting From Hometown Economic Development Grants to the Municipal Association's New IMPACT Fund** – This session will explore the exciting evolution of the HEDG program into the new IMPACT Fund. It will introduce two dynamic grant categories — Problem Solver Grants and Big Idea Grants — designed to address community challenges and drive innovation. Attendees will learn how this transformation provides a more modern, flexible and impactful approach to funding that empowers local leaders to create meaningful change in their communities. Learn more about the fund on page 14.
- **Short Takes on Hot Topics** – This fast-paced session will provide quick updates and guidance on a variety of issues important to cities and towns.

The full agenda for the Annual Meeting is available at www.masc.sc (keyword: Annual Meeting) and on the Association's app.

The app allows users to plan out which sessions they will attend, and connects them with information on speakers, exhibitors, sponsors and attendees. Download it from either the App Store or Google Play by searching for "Municipal Association of SC."



Annual Meeting VC3 Tech Talks to Examine AI, Cybersecurity

The Municipal Association of SC and its technology partner, VC3, will offer Tech Talks throughout the 2025 Annual Meeting — quick, 15-minute sessions about critical information for municipalities.

Here are some of the sessions to be covered. The full meeting agenda is on the Association's website, www.masc.sc (keyword: Annual Meeting) and on the Municipal Association of SC app, which can be downloaded through the App Store or Google Play.

AI Applications in Local Government: Empowering Public Safety, Transportation, Urban Planning and Resident Services

Municipal officials may use AI tools like CoPilot and ChatGPT to increase efficiency and get answers to difficult questions. This presentation will look at broader AI applications that are starting to positively impact municipalities. By showcasing examples of cities and towns using AI to improve various public services, it will give a sense of today's cutting edge, and what may come to municipalities in the near future.

Advanced AI Tips for ChatGPT, Word, Excel and Outlook

Many users are still learning and experimenting with the basic features of AI tools. This session will offer advanced AI tips for ChatGPT and Microsoft CoPilot, providing new ideas about how to use these powerful tools.

A Guide to Municipal IT Budget Planning

It's important for cities to create a detailed IT budget to help uncover inefficiencies, save money and better execute goals. This presentation will cover the components of an IT budget, tips on presenting IT budgets to council and budgeting examples.

Disaster Recovery Checklist and Best Practices for Municipalities

A disaster recovery plan for IT, be it for a ransomware attack or natural disaster, goes far beyond just data backup. Recovered data isn't very helpful when it looks like a pile of random stuff needing to be pieced back together. This session will share IT disaster scenarios and a nine-point disaster recovery checklist.

Is Your Municipality Compliant with CJIS's Updated MFA Security Policy?

In 2024, the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services mandated multi-factor authentication, or MFA, on all systems that can access Criminal Justice Information, or CJI, data. That means MFA must be deployed on all devices that can access CJI data regardless of location, including mobile devices, physical workstations, and remote access. This presentation will explain why it's important to address this mandate as soon as possible.

Why Municipalities Need a .gov Domain and Professional Email Provider

A need for professionalism is very important when residents deal with government. For many, the .gov email address, which has become expected and standard for government, and should be part of a professional email domain that lends a municipality a stamp of legitimacy. Also, decisions on where to store email data can affect email delivery, records retention, and compliance. This presentation will look at each email issue separately and offer some ways to resolve them.

The End of Windows 10 Support: What's Happening, Why It's Important and What to Do Next

Think of Windows 10 like having a 10-year-old car — and after October 14, 2025, no mechanic or car technician can provide maintenance or repairs on it anymore. It's only a matter of time before the car wears down, introduces significant safety risks, and one day just stops working. This presentation will cover of the severe problems of using Windows 10 past its expiration date.

Still Relying on Antivirus? It's No Longer Enough

Antivirus software used to be as common as locking the front door, serving as the primary defense for anyone looking to protect their IT network against cyber threats. Today, cyber intruders can often bypass traditional antivirus protections with disturbing ease. Learn why antivirus cannot keep up with today's threats, why endpoint detection and response, or EDR, is now the current baseline standard in cybersecurity, and why many cyber insurance providers categorize EDR as a must-have for policy qualification.



Learn About Purchasing Contracts at the Annual Meeting

Attendees at the Annual Meeting will have opportunities to learn about many of the contracts available through the City Connect Market program. A partnership between the Municipal Association of SC and HGACBuy, the City Connect Market enables South Carolina's cities and towns to take advantage of volume discounts for many of their purchases.

HGACBuy was first created by the Houston-Galveston Area Council of Texas in 1975. Its staff receive bids and assist with local government purchasing around the nation.

In brief sessions taking place throughout the Annual Meeting, HGACBuy staff will explain many of the available contracts which can cover everything from fire

trucks to ambulances, public works equipment, police officer body cameras and playground equipment.

Here are each day's sessions:

July 17

- From Solo to Synergy: Your First Step into Cooperative Buying
- Optimizing Fire and Emergency Procurement: Balancing Cost, Quality and Speed
- Crafting Extraordinary Public Events: Streamlined Procurement for Impactful Experiences

July 18

- From Strategy to Savings: Cooperative Purchasing as a Procurement Power Tool

- Smart Fleet Procurement: Strategies for Cost Optimization and Operational Excellence
- Waste Not: Streamlining Public Works Procurement for Impact

July 19

- Cooperative Purchasing in 2025: Evolving Strategies, Insights and New Contracts You Should Know About
- Flexible Workforce, Firm Contracts: Temp Staffing in Focus

Find more details on the City Connect Market at www.masc.sc (keyword: City Connect Market). The full Annual Meeting schedule is available in the Association's app.

Small Cities Summit to Examine Forms of Government, Financial Management



Small Cities
SUMMIT

The Municipal Association of SC Small Cities Summit takes place Wednesday, August 13, in Columbia to cover many issues most relevant to small cities and towns.

The Association will give registration preference to those municipalities whose population is fewer than 3,000 residents. The one-day meeting will feature conference sessions and a lunch.

Here's some of what's in store for the day:

- **Forms of government roles and responsibilities** – South Carolina law provides three forms of municipal government: the council form, mayor-council form, and council-manager form. While the council has the same legislative role in each, there are key differences among them in how mayors, and potentially managers or administrators, operate.
- **Effective financial management and internal control policies** – Well-organized finances are a key part of a smoothly-operating municipality, while internal control policies can help detect fraudulent activity occurring among employees or officials.

- **Business licensing schedule updates** – The Business License Tax Standardization Act of 2020 established ongoing steps that cities and towns in South Carolina must undertake to keep their business licensing practices compliant with state law. One of the ongoing requirements involves cities updating their class schedules every odd-numbered year, including 2025.

There will also be an "Agency Hall," where local officials can learn about the services of various state agencies, and a lunchtime panel discussion to address small-city governance questions that attendees submit in advance.

The registration deadline for the Small Cities Summit is August 1. There is a hotel block at the Hilton Columbia Center at 924 Senate St. with a rate of \$179 and a deadline of July 13. The meeting will take place at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, located at 1101 Lincoln St.

Find all details at www.masc.sc (keyword: Small Cities Summit).



Training Can Reduce Dangers of Distracted Driving

Drivers will often drive their vehicles every day, and especially when they drive familiar routes, their mind “goes into autopilot,” with attention to the process lessened and the dangers of distracted driving increased.

Those distractions can easily become deadly — for pedestrians, bicyclists, passengers and drivers. In 2023, distracted driving resulted in 3,276 deaths, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Between the many distractions of everyday life as well as the seemingly accelerating number of distractions inherent in modern cell phones and vehicle dashboard features, the problems of distracted driving seem to be ever-growing. For example, the SC Municipal Insurance and Risk Financing Fund reported a 22% increase in the total incurred claims for vehicle accidents in December 2024, as compared to the same time in 2023.

Actions like texting or otherwise using a cell phone is now the classic example of a driving distraction, and an important new state law passed in 2025, the SC Hands-Free and Distracted Driving Act, will now regulate this. Even so, any activity that diverts attention away from the road is a distraction — and attention is a finite resource.

The National Safety Council notes in its guide on driver distraction that people “cannot accomplish more than one cognitively demanding task in the same time frame with optimal focus and effectiveness given to each task. One task is primary and the other is secondary.”

The distractions that can take away from this focus include those that are cognitive, manual and visual.

Cognitive distractions

Cognitive distractions can be thought of as a mental workload — all the things that are in drivers’ heads that do not involve the driving process. This can include anything going on in the drivers’ lives, like stressors or responsibilities, but it can also be other factors taking place in the vehicle — cell phones, talking to a passenger or listening to music.

Manual distractions

Safe driving requires both hands on the steering wheel. Anything that takes either hand off the steering wheel is a manual distraction. Examples are changing the radio station, going through the console, reaching into the passenger seat, eating, drinking, smoking or using a mobile device.

Visual distractions

Visual distractions are those that take the driver’s eyes off the road, such as looking at the radio or any dashboard display, shifting attention to an object on the roadside, consulting a map or reading a text.

Taking eyes off the road can be serious, especially at higher speeds. A driver who is traveling 55 miles per hour and reads a text message for less than 5 seconds will travel the length of a football field without looking at the road — resulting in the same level of danger as driving the same distance blindfolded.

Reducing distractions

Supervisors can encourage safe driving in a number of ways:

- **Train employees on avoiding distracted driving.** This can be accomplished by encouraging participation in the National Safety

Council’s Defensive Driver Course. The Municipal Association’s Risk Management Services offers the four-hour course to SC Municipal Insurance Trust and SC Municipal Insurance and Risk Financing Fund members, available by contacting Loss Control staff at losscontrol@masc.sc. SCMIT and SCMIRF members can also take advantage of online training for distracted driving through LocalGovU. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: LocalGovU).

- **Establish a distracted driving policy banning all employee use of cell phones or mobile devices while driving.** While South Carolina’s new hands-free cell phone law covers some of this, policies can address items not included in the law, such as the use of hands-free and voice command systems.
- **Consider other possibilities for assisting drivers who may experience distractions.** Cities can use telematics or in-cab cameras with integration of artificial intelligence that can detect distracted or drowsy driving, and give real-time alerts to the driver for coaching behaviors.

When drivers are alert, they are less likely to cause a collision, and they are better positioned to take evasive action to avoid a wreck.

The NHTSA website, www.nhtsa.gov, has resources on driving risks such as distracted driving, drowsy driving and speeding.

SC Hands-Free and Distracted Driving Act

In May, the South Carolina General Assembly passed bill H3276 to significantly restrict usage of cell phones while driving. It takes effect September 1, 2025, and for the first 180 days, officers will issue only warnings for violations.

The law governs the use of a “mobile electronic device” while driving, such as a cell phone, but it also covers any similar electronic device or video game.

When operating a motor vehicle on a public road, drivers face several prohibitions:

- Using the device by holding or otherwise supporting it. There are exceptions for earpieces or voice-based communications through a wrist device.
- Reading, writing or sending a text message or other text material.
- Watching video of any kind.

H3276 does allow drivers to use a phone or other electronic device for navigation, listening to audio, obtaining traffic information in a way that does not require typing, or initiating or ending a cell phone call or using voice-to-text in a way that does not require typing.

The law has some exceptions in which a driver may use their phone while touching it:

- The vehicle is lawfully stopped or parked.
- The driver is reporting an accident, emergency or safety hazard to a public safety official.
- The driver is performing official duties as a first responder.



Local Legislative Meetings to Return This Fall

Being an advocate for cities and towns at the State House doesn't happen just from January to May. Although the 2025 legislative session has come to an end, the work is just beginning. While it's not an election year and there are still bills pending for next session, mayors and councilmembers have the perfect opportunity to strengthen the bond between hometowns and their legislators.

With lawmakers spending more time in their home districts, now is an excellent time for municipal leaders to cultivate relationships with their State House delegation and look for opportunities to invite legislators to see the accomplishments of cities and towns, and to talk about concerns related to governing at the local level.

And the Municipal Association of South Carolina is going to help.

This fall, the Municipal Association's advocacy staff will hit the road to facilitate meetings with municipal officials and legislative delegations together to educate representatives and senators on pending legislation, involve local officials in sharing solutions and building relationships from the ground up.

The meetings will not be organized by council of government areas as they have been in the past, but will take place in cities centrally located in regions around the state. The Municipal Association will schedule either lunch or dinner meetings to give more opportunities for local officials and legislators to attend.

Look for more information on these meetings, including locations and times, after the Association's 2025 Annual Meeting. During the Annual Meeting, Association staff will provide a legislative update on Friday, July 18.

2025 – 2026 legislative session basics

The SC General Assembly adjourned in May to end the first half of the two-year session, and will return in January 2026 for the second half. 2026 is the next election year, with House members up for election, as well as all constitutional officers.

Bills that did not pass in 2025 will remain active for 2026. Some bills of significant interest to cities and towns are on that list, such as S102, which would allow municipalities without an operating millage to impose one. It was passed by the Senate but not the House.

The Association legislative tracking system is the place to find all of the bills introduced during the 2025 session that have an effect or could have an effect on cities and towns — currently with more than 290 entries.

The year-end legislative report will be available at the Annual Meeting outlining the final budget passed by the General Assembly, and all other bills that either passed or are pending for 2026.

Contact Municipal Association Director of Advocacy Casey Fields at cfields@masc.sc or 803.933.1203 for more information.



Reducing Conflict in Tough Workplace Conversations

Speaking to a room full of human resources professionals, Deana Keever noted that she did not need to explain the damage that can be done to working relationships by incivility among coworkers. When colleagues do not show each other respect and fail to communicate purposefully and effectively, emotion can replace logic easily, and the ability to cooperate can easily degrade to the point that nothing can be accomplished.

Keever, who is the human resources director for the City of Rock Hill, focused instead on strategies for resolving conflict when it does occur, and even starting the difficult, and necessary, conversations that she said many supervisors and employees will sometimes delay indefinitely out of a fear of conflict.

She spoke at the Spring Meeting of the SC Municipal Human Resources Association, a conference that also covered issues like Employee Assistance Programs and benefits through the SC Public Employee Benefit Authority.

In communicating, she said, the way a person delivers a message will often outweigh the specifics of what is said, with nonverbal cues either validating or negating the message.

“Tone speaks louder than what you’re saying,” she said. “The energy you put into that, negative or positive, really makes a difference, as well as body language.”

Keever walked the audience through the differences in communication styles, including an assertive communicator, who can clearly express wants, needs and opinions; to an aggressive communicator, who can also express these things about themselves but is less likely to consider the wants and needs of others. A passive communicator does not express these things and is likely to prioritize the needs of others above themselves, while a passive-aggressive communicator is likely to indirectly express wants, needs and opinions.

“I see myself a little bit of myself in all of these at different times, and I think it’s just an awareness that we should have. This is a good tool to share back with your workplace to say, maybe with our styles, there’s going to be a reason why we’re not highly effective at communication, because our styles are different,” she said.

Some of the key points in communicating well, she said, include listening actively — engaging eyes, ears and emotions — and it also requires communicators to understand the impact that their personal perspectives

have on a conversation, and working to understand other people while aiming to be understood by them as well.

She likened communication to “lumps of clay,” that can be gradually shaped into meaningful objects through ongoing effort.

“We’re always forming our perception based off of what’s sent to us, and so is someone else, doing the exact same thing,” Keever said. “That’s something that we have to keep in mind as HR directors and other team members, that we are helping folks navigate difficult conversations at times — maybe we’re the one having to have that difficult conversation — but understanding they’re going to hear it from their perspective.”

The SC Municipal Human Resources Association promotes sound human resources administration and encourages innovative programs among the state’s city and town governments. MHRA provides training programs as well as an opportunity to exchange ideas among its members, both through meetings and through its very active listserve. The national Human Resources Certification Institute and the Society for Human Resources Management recognize MHRA’s training for continuing education credits. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: MHRA).



Planning Public Facilities for Current and Future Growth

Facing rapid population growth, Hardeeville pursued a feasibility study to identify the steps it needed to take to upgrade city facilities in the coming years. Photo: City of Hardeeville.

Jasper County's growth is not just rapid by South Carolina standards — it's one of the fastest-growing counties in the country. Most of that growth is in Hardeeville, which has grown from 1,500 residents in 1990 to nearly 14,000 in the U.S. Census' 2024 estimate. The city adds 2,000 to 3,000 new residents each year.

And at 56 square miles, the City of Hardeeville also has a lot of ground to cover with public safety and fire service.

"We're bursting at the seams," said Matt Davis, the deputy city manager. "We've continually adding police officers, we now have four fire stations so we can have adequate response times, and we're planning for additional ones as well. We have more people in our planning department, our finance department, our public works. We have a very strong, robust parks and recreation program."

Those staffing needs have meant the city has needed to get creative with its existing facilities, moving people around and adding new workspaces. For example, the city converted one of the bays in its public works building into the current home of its building safety department, housing inspectors and plan examiners.

"We've constructed new offices, new walls, moved furniture around, all those kinds of things to keep accommodating," Davis said. "But at some point, you reach a level where the rubber meets the road. You're going to have to do something else."

The city worked with McMillan Pazdan Smith Architecture to create a feasibility study identifying the architectural and engineering work necessary in the coming years.

"Utilizing demographic and industry information, MPS was able to project space needs to align with community growth, infrastructure requirements and help the City of Hardeeville

prioritize capital projects that will have a tremendous impact on staff retention and recruitment, services and smart growth," says Minta Ferguson, director of planning with McMillan Pazdan Smith.

Davis said the top space priorities are a new fire station, city hall and police headquarters. The fire station is under construction, while the city is in the early investigative stages for a city hall.

He said cities must be careful not to be seen as spending exorbitant sums on something the average person may not see as valuable — a city hall, for example, needs to be designed to last a long time and reflect community character, without being "too fancy."

He stressed the importance of hiring a professional firm that can "hit that sweet spot" for understanding the necessary size and function of a new building.

In addition to identifying and predicting space needs, the city also received a facilities condition report from MPS, with a dashboard tool it can use to monitor the city's facilities and keep track of everything from the HVAC systems to roofs, windows, doors and interiors.

Davis recommends other cities try to project not just next year's needs, but the next five years, "so you're not caught flat-footed and you're not, quite frankly, having your employees work in closets, because we literally had employees working in closets at one point."

In Greenville County, Simpsonville has seen its population skyrocket in recent years. The growth brought the need to upgrade facilities, particularly the outdated police and fire department headquarters and stations, said Dianna Gracely, Simpsonville's city administrator.



The city council meeting space in Simpsonville's new city hall is known as "the Ellipse" due to its curved design. Photo: City of Simpsonville..

At the same time, the city hall building on Main Street – which Simpsonville purchased from Duke Energy in the 1990s, was cramped. A dual-use room on the second floor was home to both the city council chambers and court, and didn't function well for either, she said.

"As the city has grown, we hired more staff and we had people sharing offices, and it just wasn't a great work environment," Gracely said. "In addition, a public building was not the highest and best use of property on Main Street. So it made sense, if we were building new police department, new fire department headquarters and a new station, that we would move city hall as well."

The city's new Municipal Complex opened at the end of 2024 on the periphery of Simpsonville City Park, now known as Gracely Park. It's home to the city hall, police department and a fire department and headquarters. The third building houses both county court operations and city courts.

"During the process, we also said, 'You know, we're having to do all of the stormwater retention. It's time to redo this old park, too,'" she said. "It had cracked sidewalks, there wasn't adequate light, the football fields were not level. It was not a great place for organized sports, much less anything else. So we took that opportunity to completely reimagine City Park as well, with a new playground, new small amphitheater for community events, tennis, pickleball, basketball, disc golf, two regulation size football fields."

The city borrowed the funds in 2021, and used the same design team and contractor for the entire project, ensuring a cohesive look.

The move from the old city hall also created property on Main Street that will be sold, torn down and redeveloped as a mixed-use building.

"There will be about a \$35 million investment. That's a nice addition to the tax rolls," Gracely said. "And it also provides more housing downtown, which we really want to achieve, and there also will be commercial spaces for an upscale restaurant and some other retail amenities."

Simpsonville was fortunate in funding the projects, she said, because when it borrowed in 2021, the interest rate was low – just under 2%.

She also stressed the importance of having a council committed to the project.

"Make sure all of your council is on board and understands the importance of it, because you're going to have some members of the public who question why are you making this huge investment in these public buildings? You could have paved more roads with that money. We've heard that," she said. "So you have to realize you're building these buildings for the next 75 to 100 years. And it's important to the community, because when you invest in yourself, it makes other people realize you're worth investing in when you have decent public facilities."

As Charleston's popularity and population has exploded over the past decades, that growth has spread to neighboring municipalities, including the Town of Summerville.

That population growth has meant the need to improve and expand public facilities. The town is in the pricing phase and has hired a construction manager at risk for a new public safety building to replace the 40-year-old overcrowded facility, said Chris Makowski, the town's public information officer.

The current facility will be torn down and the new building, which will house the police and fire departments along with courts, will be built on the existing public safety building site. The new facility will include space for meeting and training areas, a large lobby space, community rooms and greenspace.

"The building will be designed with the public in mind," he said. "We are hoping this will provide facilities for the next 20 to 25 years. It's built for the future growth of Summerville. It's not built for 2025, it's built for 2045."

Makowski said the city is hoping to see some movement on construction by the end of 2025 or early 2026, when staff members will move into temporary offices during the building process.

Goose Creek is another Lowcountry city with explosive growth, growing from a population of about 29,000 in 2000 to more than 50,000 today. New residents come with the need for new public facilities, and Goose Creek has several newly open or in the planning stages.

Among those is The Assembly at Goose Creek, a 13,500-square-foot, multi-purpose building located next to City Hall behind the Municipal Center that is expected to open at the end of 2026, said Public Information Officer Frank Johnson.



This rendering illustrates the plan for a new public safety building to house Summerville's police and fire departments, along with courts. Photo: Town of Summerville.

"With stunning lakefront views and beautiful green space on either side, The Assembly will be an ideal and much-needed local venue for weddings, banquets and celebrations that residents can access for generations to come," he said.

The building also will host the monthly City Council meetings, which will allow the existing City Council chambers to be converted to needed office space in City Hall.

Other expansions include the Daning Amphitheater on the lake at the Municipal Center next to the Recreation Complex. The amphitheater seats 900 with additional green space for more than 3,000. The amphitheater has already attracted national acts to Goose Creek, while also hosting dramatic, musical and recreational events.

The city's Central Creek Park opened two years ago, and features the county's first inclusive playground, along with a

pickleball facility, a basketball court, a walking trail and more, while two years ago, the city opened John McCants Veterans Park as a tribute to the city's military history. A short walk from Central Creek Park is the Creek Collective which opened in late May and which provide a focal point for the city's growing art scene.

Meanwhile, the city will break ground on a new fire station this summer.

"The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, both in feedback we've received and most importantly in the use of the facilities," Johnson said. "Central Creek Park attracts hundreds of people every day – seven days a week. Every big concert at the Amphitheater – including this year's 'Creekapalooza' shows – has resulted in a waiting list for tickets. We know that The Assembly and the Creek Collective will also be a gathering spot for residents for many, many decades to come."



Goose Creek built the Joseph S. Daning Amphitheater behind its city hall and next to the Recreation Complex. Photo: City of Goose Creek.

Cities Nurture Home-grown Businesses

The Platform at Greer, an entrepreneurship initiative, helps those who are starting up businesses connect with resources and community support. Photo: City of Greer.

Cities and states have long used economic development incentives to lure in manufacturers and retailers, but more recently, cities have started using different tools — incubation and collaboration efforts — to nurture home-grown small businesses.

Consider, for example, Blue Ridge Heating and Air, owned by Chris Davidson and Ben Lagrange, with offices in Greenville, South Carolina, and Brevard, North Carolina. The owners, both engineers who have worked for several large manufacturing companies including General Electric, attended an IGNITE Greer event, a networking function where they and many others listened to presentations from two different companies looking for help with a problem.

“They might overview things they’ve done to try to address that problem and what the results were,” Lagrange said. “But then there would be this 10-minute time period where the people in the audience could make suggestions or ask questions, basically give them feedback.”

The two were intrigued and wanted to learn more about the Platform at Greer, an entrepreneurship initiative which had created the IGNITE Greer program and others to help entrepreneurs and innovators grow their businesses.

“I felt like that was a really good forum that the Platform had put together that really didn’t cost much of anything, so I started going to those whenever I could,” Lagrange said. “And that got me more involved in the Greer community in general.”

This is one of the key goals of the Platform at Greer, says Reno Denton, assistant city administrator for community and economic development for the City of Greer, which runs the program.

“The mission basically is twofold — one, to be authentically helpful to entrepreneurs and innovators; and then two, to really help those entrepreneurs, innovators build community,” Denton said. “We went through a long process of prototyping our program, and one of the comments that came through again and again is sort of how lonely entrepreneurs, innovators felt in their journey.”

The Platform at Greer also offers an evening gathering called the Huddle, and a two-day Bootcamp helping businesses determine whether there is a market for their product.

“What we found is that there were lots of resources on the front end for folks who wanted to start a small business — groups that would teach them how to organize and who to talk to, how to think about going from a hobby to a business,” Denton said. “We also found there were lots of resources on the back end for those successful entrepreneurs who are ready to scale, and perhaps looking for support and funding ... What was missing was that critical middle piece of product-market fit, whether or not folks would actually pay for the product or service that the entrepreneur or the innovator was creating. So the Bootcamp became our niche play.”

Davidson and Lagrange used the Bootcamp to test a mold sensor they created.

“We came out of that saying, yes, there’s definitely a market,” Lagrange said.

They received coaching on product development and marketing, patented their sensor and began selling it to heating and air customers. They also tapped into resources from the Platform for attorneys, marketing and website development.

Now running for 12 years, the City of Columbia hosts a Small Business Week Conference. Photo: City of Columbia.

Nearly 100 entrepreneurs have now participated in the Platform's Bootcamp and more than 1,000 companies participate annually in all its programming.

The City of Columbia has offered similar programming through its Office of Business Opportunities for more than 20 years. Its support includes workshops, webinars and an entrepreneur training program helping about 50 businesses a year learn about financing, branding and other topics at a reduced fee.

"It's important for businesses and individuals to have some buy-in to the process, to commit themselves to attend the class every week for 10 weeks," said Ayesha Driggers, director of the Office of Business Opportunities. "So we do charge that nominal fee."

The Fast Trac Growth Venture program helps businesses that have been operating five or more years grow with classes on budgeting, sales strategies, management and business planning.

NxLevel For Micro Entrepreneurs is for startups or businesses less than two years old with fewer than five employees. The 10-week course takes owners and would-be owners from choosing an idea and developing a business plan to analyzing their market and risk management. The city celebrates each class with a graduation.

"It speaks to the spirit of our office," Driggers said. "We really are here to encourage our small businesses, to help them navigate the process along the way."

Many graduates later attend the Small Business Week Conference, which the city has hosted for 12 years. It brings business owners together with other resource organizations, including local chambers of commerce and the Small Business Development Center. Other businesses, such as financial and professional services firms, attend to network and meet potential clients.

The city's initiatives also include reducing business regulations, and using grants to help small businesses fill a community need, such as getting produce from local farms and vendors to residential areas that may lack easy access to fresh food.

Columbia plans to expand funding for its successful building facade program to help businesses beautify their buildings, and offers low-interest business loans for small businesses.

"We recognize that we can't do everything for everybody, but we feel like we're a good starting point to kind of alleviate some frustration," Driggers said of her office.

Being that first step is the goal of the Don Ryan Center for Innovation in Bluffton, which began in 2012 in partnership with Clemson University's technology incubator program. The center initially offered meetings and one-on-one mentoring with retired professionals to early stage and startup businesses.



The Don Ryan Center for Innovation in Bluffton uses a group of mentors to give guidance to entrepreneurs. Photo: Don Ryan Center for Innovation.

"At the time, Bluffton was really dominated by tourism, hospitality, construction and retail," said David Nelems, the center's CEO. "They really wanted to widen the tax base, especially after 2008. They wanted to do different things and they wanted to be progressive in the best sense of the word."

The center has grown and evolved ever since, and now helps local businesses in all stages. The startup programs are geared to early-stage businesses. The growth track helps those that have a positive cash flow but want to expand or innovate. The center helps businesses in the thriving stage who may still need occasional support. The center also targets military veterans and first responders with its Heroes program and helps skilled tradespeople, such as electricians and plumbers, start businesses.

In 13 years, Don Ryan Center for Innovation has helped over 300 companies and formally "incubated" 95 of those. The five-year survival rate for small businesses it has worked with is 73%, compared to 50% nationwide.

Some of the center's key success stories include a data analytics company, which provided auto information to lenders and insurance companies, that recently sold for \$60 million, and a microgreens grower in Hardeeville that went from "Is this a business?" to an award-winning success with revenues in the millions.

The center operates with a staff of three, who all have entrepreneurial backgrounds. It is funded by the Town of Bluffton but does charge fees — below market rates — for its services.

"We learned a long time ago that you have to charge for it," Nelems said. "There are other organizations that do this for free — free business plan, free budget. And we learned that when you give it away for free, nobody really respects it. They miss meetings. They're not really engaged."

The Don Ryan Center for Innovation is also planning a new facility called the Hive — a landing pad for businesses looking to relocate or expand to Bluffton.

"Our goal is just to expand the tax base of Bluffton and the region and broaden the types of industries that we have," Nelems said.

From HEDG to IMPACT

A New Chapter in Municipal Association of SC Grants

After years of the Municipal Association of SC supporting local economic development initiatives through the Hometown Economic Development Grant program, commonly known as HEDG, a new and expanded grant program is taking its place — one updated to reflect the continuously evolving needs and ambitions of communities across the state. The Association is now introducing the IMPACT Fund, an acronym for “Innovative Municipal Projects for Advancing Change and Transformation.”

This newly structured program aims to empower municipalities with greater flexibility, increased funding opportunities and a renewed focus on innovation and problem-solving. The IMPACT Fund will now offer two distinct grant tracks tailored to different kinds of municipal needs.

Big Idea Grant

The Big Idea Grant will be the flagship offering of the new program. Awarding two grants of up to \$100,000 each, this grant is designed for municipalities with bold, creative and forward-thinking ideas. Projects might include new public space designs, technology-driven service improvements or community-wide initiatives that tackle challenges in fresh ways. The grant will focus on innovation and the potential for broad, long-term impact.

Problem Solver Grant

On the other end of the spectrum will be the Problem Solver Grant, a direct successor to the HEDG model. These

eight \$25,000 grants are geared toward smaller, more routine — but equally important — municipal projects. This includes practical fixes for municipalities, such as repairs to city or town halls, upgrades to municipal playgrounds, or accessibility improvements in public buildings. The goal is to help communities, particularly smaller towns, address immediate challenges that can enhance daily life for residents.

Why the changes?

The shift from HEDG to the IMPACT Fund reflects feedback from municipal leaders and evolving statewide priorities. While the economic development focus of HEDG served many communities well, there was growing demand for a more flexible, inclusive grant model — one that supports both ambitious new ideas and the everyday maintenance that keeps towns running smoothly.

The IMPACT Fund is designed to respond to both of those needs. Whether a city or town is dreaming big or focused on fixing what’s broken, it can now pursue a grant that fits.

Applications

The application process for both the Big Idea and Problem Solver Grants will open just after the Municipal Association of SC 2025 Annual Meeting, specifically on Monday, July 21, at 10 a.m. The deadline will be Friday, September 26, at 5 p.m. For both grant applications, the city or town council must pass a resolution in support of the application.

The application and reporting processes will be even more streamlined than previous years. The goal is to help municipalities get things done without being bogged down by complicated paperwork or confusing guidelines.

For the Big Idea Grants, the evaluation criteria will focus on creativity, potential widespread impact, and strategic value. Projects featuring innovative ideas and new ways of thinking will be rewarded.

For the Problem Solver Grants, the evaluation criteria will focus on financial need, community impact and the applying municipality’s history of successfully completing grant projects.

The IMPACT Fund, powered by VC3, represents a broader commitment to supporting municipalities as they adapt, grow and improve. Whether city leaders are tackling a pressing infrastructure issue or envisioning a transformative community initiative, this program is designed to meet them where they are, and help them get where they want to go.

More information will be available once the application period opens on July 21, at www.masc.sc (keyword: Impact Fund).

**Deadline for IMPACT
grant applications:
Friday, September 26,
5 p.m.**

Getting Competitive to Attract New Business to Your Community

By Charles Parker, Project Director, The Retail Coach



Open for
BUSINESS

Most local leaders must wear multiple hats. Whether you're an elected official or municipal staff, your responsibilities to the public vary wildly from one hour to the next. However, few things can catch the public's attention like an announcement of a new Target, Chick-fil-A, Texas Roadhouse, or Publix coming to town — or worse, to another town nearby.

Like so many aspects of our modern world, site selection has become heavily data-driven. Retailers and restaurants know exactly how many people live within any trade area, how many cars pass by the main intersection, income levels of residents and often even the total sales of competitors already established nearby. In an age where an analyst sitting in an Atlanta, Nashville or Dallas headquarters can break down the numbers and sales opportunity of a site anywhere across the country, the most successful communities find ways to promote their strengths that distinguish themselves from peer communities that look similar “on paper.”

Communities in close proximity to one another will frequently compete for retail stores, restaurants or entertainment concepts that need the combined population of both areas to hit site criteria thresholds and required unit sales projections. There's simply not enough “meat on the bone” in terms of population density to justify two new locations so close together. Yet interestingly, it's not always the city with the largest population or highest incomes in a region that lands a brand's first — or only — location.

So how do you compete? How do you become the community that always seems to get the exciting new developments first?

It starts with having a strong economic development and planning team that establishes a consistent and predictable approval process. That's the foundation of what being “business-friendly” truly means. Developers and tenants aren't necessarily deterred by reasonable codes or design standards, and they're typically willing to jump through a few hoops to develop in a market they believe in. What they really want is clarity about the local rules and processes upfront.

Local nuances, like what development requirements are set by different departments, the processes for zoning changes or conditional-use permits, the expected turnaround time for city planning review comments, and the predictability of the timeline for the entire approval process can all significantly impact a community's competitive edge when it comes to attracting new businesses.

It's one thing to have these processes in place, but it's another challenge entirely to effectively communicate them to potential developers and retailers. Your community might be the perfect location with streamlined processes, but if decision-makers don't know about your advantages, you could be overlooked.

The most successful municipalities don't just wait for retailers to discover them — they proactively craft compelling pitches that showcase their community's unique strengths, backed by data and presented with professional polish. They understand that in the competitive landscape of commercial development, how you tell your community's story matters just as much as the story itself.

That's why building relationships is critical to economic development. Making connections with the local broker and commercial real estate community, along with corporate-level real estate managers, is how you build the audience for your pitch and start building buy-in for your community.

Traditional economic development activity has been the focal point for many municipalities, and for good reason. Job creation, new housing, and infrastructure all play a role in retail site selection trends. Still, the most successful communities are the ones that are proactive on the retail front too, not just waiting for shopping and dining concepts to follow the other growth.

To learn more about perfecting your pitch and attracting new retail and commercial development, be sure to catch The Retail Coach session at the Municipal Association's Annual Conference on Hilton Head Island, where we'll dive deeper into proven strategies that help communities consistently win the commercial development race.



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Calendar

For a complete listing of the Association's training opportunities, visit www.masc.sc to view the calendar.

JULY

8 Setoff Debt Program 2025 Employee Training. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

9 Setoff Debt Program 2025 Employee Training. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

16 – 20 Municipal Association of SC Annual Meeting. Hilton Beachfront Resort and Spa, Hilton Head Island. For more information, see page 2, and find full details at www.masc.sc (keyword: Annual Meeting). Topics include a 2025 legislative update, leading under pressure, effective communication with legislators, attracting remote talent to your municipality, the Municipal Association's IMPACT Fund, and critical court cases impacting local government.

29 SC Business Licensing Officials Association Accreditation in Business Licensing Exam. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

AUGUST

5 Setoff Debt Program 2025 Annual Participant Training Session. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

7 Setoff Debt Program 2025 Interested Participants Training Session. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

13 Small Cities Summit. Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. For more information, see page 5.

19 Business Licensing Essentials. Virtual.

20 – 22 Municipal Court Administration Association of SC Annual Meeting.

SpringHill Suites, Downtown Greenville. Topics include victim service training for notifiers and support staff, court financials, mental health, bonds, record retention, SC DMV updates, SC court administration updates, de-escalation techniques and courtroom safety.

25 – 27 Risk Management Services Conference. Hilton Garden Inn, Downtown Columbia. Topics include distracted driving,

a legislative update, first amendment and sovereign citizens, Act 218, reducing risk when terminating an employee, workers compensation commission updates, policies and procedures for public works, a cybersecurity panel and best practices in performance management.

SEPTEMBER

4 SC Association of Stormwater Managers Third Quarter Meeting and Exhibitor Showcase. DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel, Columbia.

16 MEO Institute: Forms of Government and Municipal Economic Development. Regional Council of Government locations.

17 Main Street SC Third Quarter Managers' Training. Location to be determined, Dillon.

17 – 19 Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Institute, Year 1, Session A. Cambria Hotel Downtown/The Vista, Columbia.

17 – 19 Municipal Technology Association of South Carolina Annual Meeting. Beach House Resort, Hilton Head Island.

23 Risk Management Services: Defensive Driving. Town of Mount Pleasant Municipal Complex.