

UPTOWN



a publication of the Municipal Association of South Carolina

DOWNTOWN TRANSFORMATIONS TAKE PLANNING, PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT *page 8*



Why Property Taxes Matter *page 6*

Some FOIA Records Have No Waiting Period *page 11*

**How to Manage Account Credentials
During Municipal Staff Turnover** *page 15*

62 Officials Graduate From MEO and Advanced MEO Institutes 3

2026 Hometown Legislative Action Day Explores Civil Discourse, Road Funding 4

Why Property Taxes Matter..... 6

Budget Amendments Need a Thoughtful Approach..... 7

Downtown Transformations Take Planning, Public Engagement..... 8

Update Your Asset Schedules Before Hurricane Season..... 10

**Special Section:
Open Government**

Some FOIA Records Have No Waiting Period 11

Managing the Message When Services Are Disrupted..... 12

New Website Accessibility Requirements Begin for Some Cities in 2026..... 14

How to Manage Account Credentials During Municipal Staff Turnover..... 15

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Cover Photo: Fifth Third Park, which opened in 2025 and is home to the Minor League Baseball team the Hub City Spartanburgers, is a major piece of the transformation of downtown Spartanburg.
Photo: Hub City Spartanburgers.

Statements of Economic Interest Due March 30 at Noon



There are many types of officials who must complete a Statement of Economic Interests form with the State Ethics Commission by March 30 at noon.

In addition to the regular annual deadline, officials must also submit the forms when they have been hired into certain positions. Those hired into positions requiring an SEI must submit the form within 10 days of their hiring, or face fines.

Here are the municipality-related positions who must complete an SEI form under SC Code Section 8-13-1110:

- **All public officials**, which includes those elected or appointed by a municipality or other political subdivision of the state.
- **Most candidates for public office**, excluding candidates for federal offices.
- **Any person appointed to fill the unexpired term** of an elected official.
- **Administrators by whatever title.** This includes city administrators, managers, supervisors, or chief administrative officials. It also includes municipal clerks, and the administrators of entities such as regional planning councils, airport commissions, water and sewer districts, or development commissions.
- **Chief finance and chief purchasing officials** of municipalities and other political subdivisions, such as regional planning councils, airport commissions, water and sewer districts, or development commissions.

State law defines an economic interest as “an interest distinct from that of the general public in a purchase, sale, lease, contract, option, or other transaction or arrangement involving property or services in which a public official, public member, or public employee may gain an economic benefit.”

The economic interests that officials must disclose on the forms include their own business dealings and property, but also those of immediate family members as well.

The fines charged to the individual official, not the municipality, for overdue SEI submissions can be substantial. Once the forms become overdue, fines for not filing them can increase daily until they hit maximum amounts.

The State Ethics Commission maintains a full list of all types of public officials who are subject to the SEI requirement, as well as the circumstances under which they must make a disclosure, on its website, www.ethics.sc.gov.

62 Officials Graduate From MEO and Advanced MEO Institutes

The Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government and Advanced MEO Institute together graduated 62 municipal elected officials from across South Carolina, including 34 graduates of the MEO Institute and 28 graduates of the Advanced MEO Institute, during the 2026 Hometown Legislative Action Day in January.

Find the individual press releases for all graduates from both programs at www.masc.sc (keyword: newsroom).

MEO Institute

Since 1986, the Municipal Association of South Carolina's MEO Institute has given elected officials the knowledge they need to help their municipalities operate responsibly, efficiently and effectively. More than 2,300 mayors and councilmembers in total have graduated from the program.

City and town elected officials can graduate from the MEO Institute after they complete two daylong sessions and five other courses that they can take online or in person at any of the selected councils of governments area locations.

The next in-person session, taking place on Tuesday, March 17, is "Basic Budgeting and Municipal Finance." It addresses everything from municipal budget cycles to revenue sources, spending, financial controls and warning signs, as well as audit requirements. The registration deadline for this session is Monday, March 9.

Learn more about the MEO Institute and register for courses at www.masc.sc (keyword: MEO Institute).

MEO Institute Honor Roll

The MEO Institute Honor Roll recognizes the city and town councils that can count all members of their sitting council as graduates of the Municipal Association's MEO Institute.

The municipalities receiving this recognition during the winter 2026 session are Beaufort, Jonesville, Port Royal, Reidville, Santee, Simpsonville, Walterboro and York.

NEWS BRIEFS

The SC Arts Commission announced its 13th SC Cultural District in the downtown of the **Town of Summerville**. The state's SC Cultural District program aims to attract new artistic and cultural businesses, encourage economic development and celebrate local identity.

The U-Haul Growth Index data for 2025 included the **Charleston** region as the No. 7 metro area in the United States for population growth, with **Myrtle Beach** as the No. 3 city for growth in the nation.



< MEO Institute Graduates



Advanced MEO
Institute Graduates >

2026 Hometown Legislative Action Day Explores Civil Discourse, Road Funding



Travelers Rest Mayor and Municipal Association President Brandy Amidon speaks at the 2026 Hometown Legislative Action Day.

City and town officials from across the state came together in Columbia on January 20 for the Municipal Association of South Carolina's 2026 Hometown Legislative Action Day to receive updates on current legislative issues and visit their legislative delegation at the State House.

Here's a look at some of the sessions from HLAD.

Legislative advocacy

The core of HLAD is to provide a time for municipal officials to meet face-to-face with their legislative delegation with a collective voice to emphasize the issues that matter most to cities and towns as they provide services for their residents — although working relationships require ongoing dialogue that take place across a much longer time period.

City of Travelers Rest Mayor and Municipal Association of SC President Brandy Amidon noted that, in much the same way that elected officials need to explain to residents how their local government works, these officials also need to stay in communication with their state representatives about how state-level decisions affect cities and towns.

Mayors and councilmembers who take part in legislative advocacy “already know the value of making this extra effort to educate ourselves on what’s happened in Columbia, but also working to foster relationships with our representatives before we have an ask,” she said. “It’s one of the best feelings as a mayor or councilmember — when you get a call from a representative at the State House, asking for your opinion.”

The Municipal Association's advocacy team provided updates on a variety of issue as they stand at the beginning of the second year in the 2025 – 26 legislative session, including everything from road funding to protecting municipal property tax revenue, as well as potential changes to the state's homestead property tax exemption.

The Association provides numerous ways for local officials to pay close attention to legislative action throughout the session, including the weekly *From the Dome to Your Home* reports assembled by the advocacy team each Friday, as well as

the accompanying podcasts featuring additional insights and commentary from the team. The reports are available at www.masc.sc (keyword: Dome).

Civility and dignity

The Municipal Association's extensive focus on civility in local government, a major part of its efforts since 2021, continued at HLAD, with city and town leaders at reciting the Association's Civility Pledge, available at www.masc.sc (keyword: civility), at the beginning of the meeting.

Attendees heard a keynote address from Tami Pyfer, co-creator of the Dignity Index. Built on the principle that contemptuous language stands in opposition to language that recognizes the dignity and humanity of others, and that dignity-focused language can heal political divisions, the Dignity Index provides a research-driven scale for evaluating public statements and better understanding how people approach conflicts.

“Our shorthand definition for contempt is this — it's a feeling of disdain or disgust,” she said. “I'm going to label you, I'm going to avoid you, or I'm going to judge you, because I see myself above you, versus dignity, which is this inherent worth that we all have from birth. I'm going to engage with you, I'm going to be curious, and I'm going to be humble, because I don't see myself as above you. I see myself in you, this humanity that we have.”

The conference also saw the return of Dave Wilson, chief strategist for McAlister Communications, and Antjuan Seawright, founder and CEO of Blueprint Strategy, two frequent television cohosts who discussed how to come from differing backgrounds and disagree in politics, all while remaining civil and friendly.

Seawright described the importance of going beyond just one day a year to speak with a legislator and building working relationships over time.

“If you call me one time a year to check in, chances are I'm not going to think you are my friend,” he said. “But if you consistently seek me out, whether it's just to say hello, whether



Tami Pyfer, co-creator of the Dignity Index, describes how the system can help people better understand language and conflict resolution in difficult disagreements.

They discussed the challenges South Carolina faces with its road system — South Carolina has more than 41,000 miles of state-owned roads, making it the nation’s fourth-largest state-maintained highway system. The system faced decades of accumulating deferred maintenance leading up to the gas tax increase of Act 40 in 2017 that inaugurated a new period of major highway projects and maintenance, and the state is also facing substantial and sustained population growth.

Glover noted that every conversation about changing ownership to local governments has centered on the need for funding to come with the roads — “one of the things we testified about [in committee meetings] is that we just can’t take this without some type of funding mechanism,” as well as the need for municipal representation on county transportation committees.

Powell described the move of roads to local government public works departments as something worth the committee considering, given that the statewide SCDOT must apply more rigidity in its approaches than local entities would.

In terms of how SCDOT can help local officials, Powell encouraged them to get to know their district engineers, resident maintenance engineers and resident construction engineers.

“We appreciate everything you [municipal officials] do in terms of making South Carolina a better place,” he said. “I certainly know that you all do a yeoman’s job helping improve our state, and I certainly appreciate all the support and feedback.”

Find presentation materials from the 2026 Hometown Legislative Action Day online at www.masc.sc (keyword: HLAD).

it’s just to say thank you, or whether it’s just to remind me that you exist, then your issues, and what you think and how you think, are going to be top of mind.”

In building relationships at the local and state level, Wilson stressed the need to seek out alternative perspectives.

“If you want to really begin to understand what’s really going on in your community, talk to somebody who doesn’t look or think like you,” he said. “Social media has done a great job of allowing us to communicate with a large group of people, but one of the things that it’s also done is — by the algorithms that are there — we start living in this little bubble, this little echo chamber, where we only hear things that sound like us. That is a place I think that really begins to hurt the conversation that needs to go on.”

Working with the SC Department of Transportation

The ownership and funding of South Carolina’s roads have become a key item of discussion among state and local governments, as the SC House DOT Modernization Ad Hoc Committee performs its work. Legislation introduced in the House would create a voluntary road transfer program to change ownership of roads, while providing incentives for local governments that accept road ownership, and to restructure the SCDOT Commission and establish a Coordinating Council for Transportation Mobility.

Amid the committee meetings, SC Secretary of Transportation Justin Powell sat down with Municipal Association of SC Executive Director Todd Glover for a discussion on how local governments work with the SCDOT.



Dave Wilson, chief strategist for McAlister Communications, and Antjuan Seawright, founder and CEO of Blueprint Strategy, discuss civility in political discourse.



Why Property Taxes Matter

by B. Todd Glover, Executive Director, Municipal Association of SC

Property taxes are often the subject of strongly held opinions, but they are also one of the most important tools for funding local government in South Carolina. Understanding where this system came from — and why it still matters today — helps explain their critical role for municipalities.

Property taxes are far from new. South Carolina passed its first property tax law in 1777. Long before income or sales taxes existed, property taxes funded local government and schools. While the state later expanded sales and income taxes to support state operations, property taxes have consistently remained the backbone of local services.

How property taxes work

In South Carolina, property taxes are local taxes within a state framework. County assessors determine fair market value. State law assigns an assessment ratio based on property use, such as owner-occupied, rental, commercial or industrial. Local governments then apply their own millage rates to generate revenue.

A millage rate is simply a tax rate: 1 mill equals \$1 for every \$1,000 of assessed value. Local governments control only this final step. State law determines classifications, while the marketplace determines value. Taxpayers typically receive one consolidated bill reflecting the combined millage of all local governments providing services.

Why property taxes make sense

Property taxes are a logical way to fund local government for several reasons:

- **They match benefits with costs.** Cities and towns provide services that directly affect property — police, fire

protection, roads, zoning and code enforcement. These services protect property values and neighborhood stability. Property taxes connect service costs to those who benefit from services.

- **They provide stability.** Property values change slowly compared to sales or income. This stability allows municipalities to plan responsibly, invest in infrastructure and maintain consistent levels of service — even during economic downturns.
- **They are efficient to administer.** Property is a straightforward thing to assess, and collection costs are relatively low, which matters for smaller towns with limited staff.
- **They have a broad base.** Property taxes apply across residential, commercial, industrial, and rental properties, spreading responsibility and keeping rates lower than narrower taxes can.

Assessment ratios and policy choices

Different assessment ratios reflect intentional policy decisions. Owner-occupied homes are assessed at 4%, while rental and commercial property are assessed at 6%, and manufacturing at 10.5%. The goal is to protect primary homeowners while relying more on income-producing property. These ratios are legislative choices about fairness and economic policy.

Act 388 and its impact

In 2006, the General Assembly passed Act 388, which places limits on how local government can increase millage. This law reshaped the system by:

- exempting owner-occupied homes from school operating millage.
- replacing lost revenue with a statewide 1% sales tax.
- capping millage increases based on inflation and population growth.
- limiting reassessment increases to 15% over five years.

While Act 388 protected homeowners, it also restricted municipal revenue growth and shifted costs to businesses, renters and consumers.

Why property taxes are essential today

For most municipalities, property taxes make up a significant portion of general fund revenues. These dollars fund core services that do not generate their own revenue — police, fire, street maintenance, parks and administration. In many towns, total property tax revenue is less than the cost of public safety alone.

Property taxes also protect property values directly. Better fire protection lowers insurance costs. Safe streets increase desirability. Clean neighborhoods boost market confidence. These investments are visible returns on taxpayer dollars.

South Carolina municipalities have limited taxing authority. Property taxes are often one of the only flexible, locally controlled revenue sources available to fund essential services. When property tax revenue is restricted without replacement, communities face service cuts, deferred maintenance and declining quality of life.

Property taxes are not just numbers on a bill — they are a shared investment in safer streets, stronger neighborhoods and sustainable communities.

Budget Amendments Need a Thoughtful Approach



Adopting a budget is one of the critical responsibilities of municipal councils. A council may only adopt a budget using an ordinance of council and through a statutorily established process. The work of enacting a budget can be a rewarding opportunity for both elected officials and staff to work together and see goals translated into plans.

Even with a great deal of effort and research, however, budgets are ultimately a statement of plans and expectations, and as the saying goes, “even the best laid plans can go awry.” As real-world conditions change and unforeseen needs arise, councils can often find themselves in need of budget amendments to ensure that their spending aligns with actual priorities and demands.

Although SC Code Section 6-1-80 establishes a technical process for adopting a budget, there is no direct statutory guidance on the process to amend a budget.

In the absence of clear legal guidance, decisions on how to undertake the amendment process must be made with careful, fact-specific consideration, and may still expose municipalities to legal challenges.

Equal dignity rule

South Carolina courts have adopted the so-called equal dignity rule, which is sometimes also referred to as the legislative equivalency rule.

The rule provides that amending a legislative act requires the same formality, or “dignity,” as the original act. In other words, if the act to be amended was an ordinance, then the amendment itself will also require an ordinance.

When applying the equal dignity rule to budget ordinances, the further question arises of whether the amending ordinance must comply with the procedural requirements established by SC Code Section 6-1-80 for the initial budget ordinance. These requirements include

- conducting a publicly noticed hearing with specific standards for the publication,
- formatting of the notice, and
- content of the notice.

The courts have not yet addressed whether the equal dignity rule requires that these additional procedural requirements — which were applicable to the original ordinance — are automatically carried over to amendments to that document. Complying with these procedural requirements can be costly and burdensome for municipalities, especially when attempting to act on short notice.

The safest course, however, is to assume that equal dignity does require that amendments follow the same procedural course as the

document to be amended. This would mean that municipalities should provide public notice and a public hearing for each amendment to the budget.

Drafting techniques

To avoid the potential burdens and costs associated with amending a budget ordinance, some municipalities deploy drafting techniques to reduce the likelihood that formal amendments will be required. Under this approach, the ordinance adopting the budget provides the municipality’s chief administrative officer with flexibility to make certain budget adjustments without requiring council action.

This authority can be broad, allowing transfers between line items, departments or divisions, so long as the aggregate of the transferred amounts does not increase the total dollar amount of the budget. In these circumstances, there would need to be careful consideration to make sure that no transfer violated fund restrictions or financial covenants.

The authority may also be more narrowly drawn to permit transfers only within a specific fund or department. For example, a manager may be permitted to transfer money within the public works department budget from a supplies line item to capital expenses.

There is no clear legal guidance on the validity of either approach, and municipalities that adopt these methods may face potential legal challenges. Nevertheless, both practices are widely used across the state and are often adopted as a policy decision to balance legal risk with the practical needs of effective governance.

Year-end budget ordinance

Another method would be to authorize each amendment by ordinance without following the additional procedural requirements, and then to adopt a final year-end budget ordinance after providing the required public notice and public hearing. This final ordinance, in effect, reconciles the budget with actual expenditures and affirms all expenditures from the prior year. Municipalities that do this should be careful, however, to ensure that expenditures prior to the final reconciliation ordinance do not exceed the amounts appropriated in the original budget.

The Handbook for Municipal Officials in South Carolina has more information on preparing, adopting and executing a budget. Find it at www.masc.sc (keyword: municipal officials handbook).



Downtown Transformations Take Planning, Public Engagement

In early 2025, construction began in downtown Aiken for a building that will serve employees of the Savannah River National Laboratory. Photo: City of Aiken.

From new baseball stadiums to top-tier hotels to refurbished public parks, transformative redevelopment of downtowns is happening in all corners of South Carolina. And the successful creation and management of these projects often comes down to two words: communication and engagement.

The City of Columbia's downtown recently experienced the opening of the redeveloped Finlay Park and a new outdoor food hall and entertainment venue in the expansive BullStreet development. Plans were also announced to redevelop the Washington Square office building and parking garage into a luxury Grand Bohemian hotel. Additionally, the city selected the designer for its Riverfront Park, expected to spur development on the adjacent land.

"I think people understand that as we grow as a city, things can't stay static. Zoning regulations have to get updated, the parking rates have to get updated, and that's never comfortable," said Ryan Coleman, director of Columbia's Office of Economic Development. "But I've sat through enough city council meetings to know that the more you can get the discussions and engagement going with the public early on, and you take that feedback and figure out where the middle ground is, typically the easier everything is."

Coleman's office often works as conduit between developers and the city planning staff, figuring out how developers' ideas best mesh with city zoning and other regulations.

"It's taking more of a solutions-oriented approach in saying, 'All right, tell us what you're doing, and if you can't do exactly that, let's figure out how to get you as close as possible to that.' It's bringing people to the table and having a conversation and figuring out what gets you from A to B, or as close to B as possible," Coleman said.

Coleman praised Columbia's city planning staff, saying the department has been empowered in recent years by council to help find the best solutions possible. The city's planning department also regularly holds public information and input sessions to help gain buy-in.

"And whether you do that internally, or whether you hire somebody to facilitate a process, you're creating a road map off a lot of front-end engagement. We want to be able to point back at the end of this process and say, 'Hey, here's what you asked for, and here's how we're delivering and meeting those ideas.' Our planning departments gotten really, really good at that because we've done so many changes recently with [the] unified development ordinance," he said.

In Spartanburg, the largest developments in the city's history are under construction or about to get underway – around \$800 million of investment spread in the western part of downtown, said Christopher George, communications and engagement director.

Projects include a new 3,500-seat Minor League Baseball park, 250,000 square feet of office space, multi-family residential development, a new hotel, extensive commercial space and a city-county administrative headquarters.

George said the projects are in line with the city's planning priorities, with the downtown code specifically promoting the type of dense, mixed-use development that is happening in the area.

"It has been a council priority for many years to grow our downtown into an economic engine that can drive our region's prosperity, and prioritizing this kind of dynamic, multi-functional development is a proven way that other communities have accomplished similar goals," he said.

Spartanburg leaders have also used messaging to address concerns.

As George said, even when a change is an "undeniable net positive, it is still often felt as a kind of loss for people, and that's understandable."

That's why the city aims to start from a position of understanding the public's concern, and then works to demonstrate how the changes coming to Spartanburg represent opportunities for residents.

"These changes mean jobs for today's residents and future generations. They mean new housing stock, which keeps housing prices from spiraling by ensuring we have the supply to meet demand. They mean new ways to enjoy our community that never would've occurred to our predecessors," he said. "Those are all positives, but in the moment, they can feel like future abstractions. We have a tremendous team dedicated to addressing all of the infrastructure impacts we will see as a result of our growth, and it's tremendously important to highlight their work."

His biggest advice is to anticipate concerns and get out in front of issues before they materialize.

"It's so important to demonstrate that your organization is being proactive in periods of expansive growth," he said. "Also, no matter what chapter of your downtown redevelopment story you're currently in, there's a city that has been there before. Look to how they managed those same concerns."

The City of Aiken was laid out as a railroad town in the early 1800s, with a grid system in its central downtown district where many of its shops and businesses are located. While it didn't face as much decline as some downtowns experienced in the late 20th century, it did have some properties close or fall into disrepair, including the old Hotel Aiken.

In 2021, the city purchased the property with the idea a developer would be found to renovate the parcel and adjacent property, but the initial effort was unsuccessful.

"I think there was a lot of tension because the first plan called for a major demolition of a lot of older buildings and also encroachment on existing rights-of-way that would interfere with our historic gridded downtown," said Stuart Bedenbaugh, the Aiken city manager.

Bedenbaugh said Aiken is home to many engaged residents who take pride in their city; many of them didn't like the way the initial plans would change downtown.

"In the era of social media and instant communication, it created a bit of an uproar," he said. "But it was the classic case of members of the public who were galvanized that led to changes. I think the council recognized that a reboot was necessary. Going back to trying to get that consensus worked very well the second go around."

This time, the city is partnering with a developer who will adaptively reuse the properties with plans for a hotel, retail and commercial parcels and a parking deck, Bedenbaugh said, adding that the project is expected to reinvigorate the whole downtown.

"A lesson that was learned with the initial part of the project is the importance

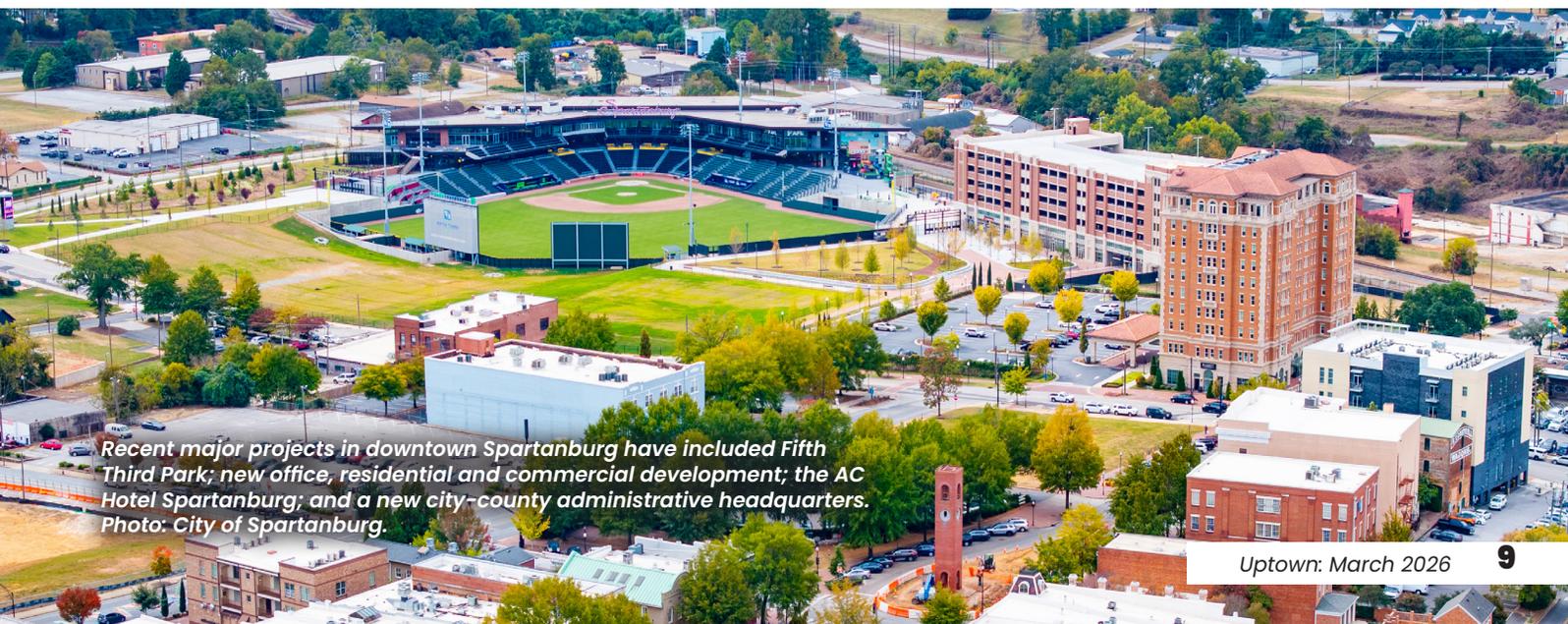


Gather COLA, a space bringing together numerous food vendors, opened in Columbia's BullStreet District a massive redevelopment of the former SC State Hospital campus, in December 2025. Photo: City of Columbia.

of listening and trying to establish a broad consensus in the community. Now, at some point somebody's got to make a final decision, but to get to that point does require a lot of time listening to a lot of people, a lot of different opinions, and then trying to meld that into something workable, that is also fiscally feasible," Bedenbaugh said.

In addition, because of the city's proximity to the Savannah River Site, Aiken received about \$20 million in state funding to build a location for the Savannah River National Laboratory that will soon house about 100 employees in Aiken's core downtown.

"That's going to bring so much to our downtown. The building can host conferences related to the mission of the national laboratory," he said. "Also, we're going to have highly paid professionals working in our downtown who can shop and dine. It is going to expose our downtown to folks from all over the United States, if not the world, and highlight the unique characteristics of Aiken."



Recent major projects in downtown Spartanburg have included Fifth Third Park; new office, residential and commercial development; the AC Hotel Spartanburg; and a new city-county administrative headquarters. Photo: City of Spartanburg.



Update Your Asset Schedules Before Hurricane Season

In the last two decades, Atlantic Ocean hurricanes have been twice as likely to intensify quickly into major storms compared to a comparable period in the late 20th century, according to research published in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

Recent named storms in South Carolina — Matthew in 2016, Florence in 2017, Dorian in 2019, Ian in 2022, and perhaps most destructive of all, Helene in 2024 — serve as important reminders to prepare well before hurricane season begins on June 1. One of the easiest and most effective preparation steps for cities and towns is ensuring that their insured property schedules are complete and current.

Keeping schedules updated helps prevent several costly problems. Out of date information may lead to paying premiums on assets that the city no longer owns. It could also overlook newly acquired buildings, equipment or vehicles that still need to be insured. When the city reports inaccurate values to insurers, it affects premiums and the accuracy of its overall risk profile.

Understanding coverage

When officials review their coverage, it's important to take time to understand whether their buildings and equipment are insured at replacement cost or actual cash value. Actual cash value deducts for depreciation of the asset over time, which can significantly reduce the payout received after a loss, and make replacing the asset more difficult.

It's also important to determine whether the city's policy includes coinsurance requirements that mandate coverage at a certain percentage of an asset's value. If the schedule is outdated, the city may unintentionally fall below this threshold and face penalties after a claim.

Flood zones

Another critical consideration is whether any of city-owned buildings fall within FEMA-designated high hazard flood zones — zones beginning with A or V — as designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The National Flood Insurance Program limits coverage to \$500,000 for buildings and \$500,000 for contents, so knowing the flood zone of properties — and what coverage the city has in place — is essential.

FEMA's Flood Map Service Center at <https://msc.fema.gov/portal/home> allows users to confirm the flood zone of properties. Buildings in high risk areas that lack NFIP coverage may leave the city responsible for substantial uninsured losses.

Vacant buildings

Vacant buildings deserve special attention as well. These structures are more susceptible to vandalism, fire and water damage. Because problems often go unnoticed, many insurers limit coverage or require additional protections. Ensuring these buildings are properly listed and classified helps avoid unpleasant surprises.

Ultimately, maintaining accurate asset schedules strengthens insurance protection, reduces administrative workload and supports a smoother claims experience when it matters most. Reviewing and updating schedules ahead of hurricane season is a smart, proactive step that helps safeguard a municipality's property and financial stability.

For more information on asset classification, contact Robert Collins, underwriting manager with the Municipal Association of SC Risk Management Services, at rcollins@masc.sc.

Some FOIA Records Have No Waiting Period

City and town officials involved in responding to requests for information under the SC Freedom of Information Act are often familiar with the deadlines required by the law — generally, 10 days to respond with an answer about whether it will release the material, and 30 days after that to release the material.

However, there are some specific instances where the FOIA law requires that the local government provide records “for public inspection and copying” immediately upon request during business hours. This means that there is no waiting period, and the law further specifies that requestors do not have to make a written request in these cases, which is common in other types of FOIA requests — they can simply ask for it verbally.

The law makes one stipulation for the requestors: they must appear “in person” to make the request.

Here are the types of information identified by SC Code Section 30-4-30(D) for immediate release:

- **The minutes of a meeting of a public body for the preceding six months.**
- **Police reports for the preceding 14 days.** The law defines these types of reports in Section 30-4-50(A) (8), indicating that these are those “reports which disclose the nature, substance, and location of any crime or alleged crime reported as having been committed.” These often take the form

of the incident reports that officers file immediately after responding to a call or making an arrest. There are exemptions for information that would constitute an unreasonable invasion of privacy, so some of the common redactions on incident reports include information about victims or juveniles.

- **Information on who has been held in jail or prison during the previous three months.**
- **Documents distributed to a public body for review during a public meeting during the previous six months.** These often take the form of “agenda packets,” which are the supplemental materials distributed to councilmembers, board members or committee members ahead of a meeting to provide greater details on the meeting’s agenda items.

Because FOIA requires governmental entities to make all of these information types available immediately, many local governments will proactively provide the information on their website. This can take the form of online archives of council meeting minutes and agenda packets for recent years, or ongoing posts about bookings and releases at a jail.

However, FOIA states that posting the materials online does not remove the responsibility to provide the documents immediately when someone appears in person to ask for it.

FOIA deadlines in other cases

Aside from the specific cases where FOIA requires no waiting period for information releases, it otherwise establishes deadlines, requires requests to be in writing, and does not indicate that requestors must appear in person.

The deadline rules appear in SC Code Section 30-4-30(C). The local government must respond within 10 business days of receiving the request with a determination on whether the information will be provided — including their reasoning if they find that the information is exempt from FOIA. The “business days” requirement means that Saturdays, Sundays and legal public holidays do not count toward the 10-day deadline. The deadline extends to 20 business days in cases where the requested information is more than 24 months old.

Beginning at the time that the municipality has issued this determination — or at the time it receives a deposit from a requestor, in cases where it requires payment — it has 30 calendar days to provide the material. Weekends and holidays count toward the 30-day deadline.

Learn more about FOIA in the SC Press Association’s publication, Public Official’s Guide to Compliance With South Carolina’s Freedom of Information Act, available at www.scpres.org.

Managing the Message When Services Are Disrupted

From road closures to trash delays and water interruptions, service disruptions are an unavoidable part of running a city — and a time when residents need to be well-informed. City officials have learned that clear, timely and coordinated communication is essential to maintaining public trust.

In Myrtle Beach, large-scale events provide one of the clearest tests of a city’s communication strategy. The Carolina Country Music Festival, which brings tens of thousands of visitors downtown, requires extensive coordination around road closures, security, staging and post-event cleanup. In recent years, the city shifted from handling numerous one-off media interviews to hosting a single, comprehensive press conference on festival grounds ahead of the event.

“This is a ‘one-stop-shop’ to make it easier for the media to get all of the answers to any question they have in one place and use it for stories throughout the week,” said Meredith Denari, director of communications and creative services for the City of Myrtle Beach. “By doing so, we also save valuable staff time. There are no ‘exclusives’ on CCMF stories, so it’s a win-win for all involved.”

Unexpected incidents demand a different, faster approach. In another case, when a sewage pipe ruptured during construction on a private site, the city relied on rapid responsiveness and clear messaging. It emailed news releases and shared those messages across social media platforms to ensure broad reach. It also used radio to reach residents who may not be online, reinforcing key messages and helping to counter speculation.

Routine but disruptive changes, such as holiday-related trash and yard debris schedule shifts, require repetition across multiple channels. Myrtle Beach communicates these changes through its city newsletter, social media, local news

outlets and neighborhood watch groups. These layered efforts recognize that residents consume information differently and that no single channel reaches everyone. While the feedback often includes questions from residents who missed the initial notice, overall response improves when the same message appears in multiple trusted places.

Water service disruptions are handled with particular care to avoid unnecessary alarm. For localized outages, Myrtle Beach Public Works staff place door hang tags on affected homes and businesses when work begins and again when service is restored.

“This is more effective unless a large area is included, because we do not want to worry residents unnecessarily or start the rumor mill,” Denari said.

For larger service areas, broader communication methods are used, but the guiding principle remains the same: inform clearly without causing undue concern.

In Hartsville, proactive, multichannel communication has become a core strategy for managing information about service disruptions.

Michelle Byers Brown, Hartsville's director of tourism, communications and Main Street Hartsville, describes a communications environment that has changed dramatically in just a few years. Residents now expect information immediately, and in formats that are easy to find and understand.

To meet that demand, the city has narrowed its focus on a few highly effective channels while remaining flexible enough to reach different audiences.

“With our demographic, we found that we were having more Facebook users as active users for the timely information — especially the unexpected. We found

that by using the tools that Facebook has now incorporated, such as local alerts, has helped us a great deal,” Byers Brown said. “It’s timely, it captures a great deal of our population and it’s fantastically free.”

With roughly 15,000 followers in a city of about 7,500 residents, the city’s official Facebook page often reaches well beyond its immediate audience through shares and community groups. Byers Brown uses the platform to share information on road closures, holiday trash schedules, weather-related updates and even advance notice of events like Duke Energy siren testing at the nearby Robinson Nuclear Plant — posts that prevent confusion and unnecessary calls to city offices.

Hartsville keeps its city Facebook page strictly focused on official city business, reinforcing the idea that if something appears there, it matters to large numbers of people. Facebook posts routinely link back to the city’s website, where residents can find more details without having to scroll through feeds.



The City of Hartsville keeps its Facebook posts focused only on official city business. Photo: City of Hartsville.

The City of Myrtle Beach uses numerous channels to alert those affected of disruptions they may face. Photo: City of Myrtle Beach.



For two-way communication, Hartsville has adopted SeeClickFix, a mobile-friendly platform that lets residents report non-emergency issues such as potholes or water concerns. Reports are automatically routed to the appropriate department and residents receive confirmation and status updates as issues are addressed. This transparency reassures residents that their concerns are heard and acted upon, while also reducing the burden on phone lines.

For the most critical situations, such as water outages, the city uses targeted robocalls tied to utility accounts. These calls are reserved for significant disruptions, ensuring they retain their impact and are not ignored.

Sometimes going “old school,” like phone calls and door hangers, can be the most effective communication tool in an outage.

“People are growing tired of too much information coming across electronically, so we still have to use all the tools. That may be an old-fashioned newsletter, that may be a door hanger, that may be a real letter in the mail,” said Debbie Szpanka, director of communications and community outreach for Bluffton. “If it’s a disruption that’s only going to affect a couple of streets, go to them directly with that information.”

For large-scale disruptions — such as weather events, flooding or widespread service delays — the town uses a full range of communication tools, from social media and websites to email alerts and news media.

Szpanka says she always tries to keep her audience in mind when trying to find the best way to communicate.

“You don’t look at the problem, you look at the people you’re trying to reach,” she said. “Everyone has their own personal preferences on how they receive information. It is our duty to bring the water to the horse in ways that they can drink it.”

Managing expectations is just as important as sharing information. Much of the frustration local governments encounter stems from confusion about who provides which services and what authority a town has. In Bluffton’s case, for example, the town does not control water, the fire services or many major roads — facts that are not always obvious to new residents, especially those arriving from other states with different government structures.

To address this knowledge gap, the town invested in a comprehensive *Bluffton Resident Resource Guide* mailed to every household. The 24-page publication explains how local government works, who to contact for specific issues and which services are — or sometimes more importantly, are not — provided by the town. Szpanka described it as a baseline educational effort designed to reduce misunderstandings before they turn into complaints.

The town reinforces this information through “mobile town halls,” bringing presentations directly to neighborhoods, civic groups and homeowners associations. These sessions often begin with skepticism or frustration, but Szpanka says the tone almost always shifts once residents feel informed and heard.

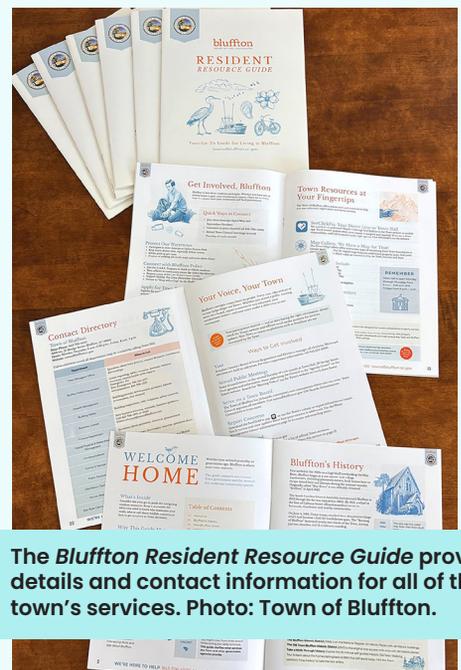
“When people understand, that anger and frustration just evaporate,” she says.

That education helps turn residents into ambassadors and they are often the ones providing accurate information to questions posed on social media.

“It became a force multiplier in terms of education about how we operate,” she says. “When we have neighbors helping other neighbors on social media, that to me is a huge success.”

Sometimes, Szpanka said, the best communication strategy is to listen.

“When people are confused or they don’t have adequate information, they’re going to get angry and they’re going to get frustrated,” she says. “you treat your public relationships like your private relationships. If people are frustrated, take some time, look them in the eye and figure out why they’re frustrated. Half the time, they don’t even expect you to fix it, they just want you to listen.”



The *Bluffton Resident Resource Guide* provides details and contact information for all of the town’s services. Photo: Town of Bluffton.

New Website Accessibility Requirements Begin for Some Cities in 2026



The U.S. Department of Justice’s new rules for web accessibility requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, will begin applying to some cities in April.

The final rule published by the department in 2024 updated the regulations for how state and local governments must keep their web content and mobile app content compliant with Title II of the ADA. Cities and towns with a population of 50,000 or more must reach compliance by April 24, 2026. Those municipalities with a population of fewer than 50,000 have until April 26, 2027, to reach compliance.

Dating to 1990, the ADA prohibits discrimination against those with disabilities among many aspects of public life, including many physical public spaces as well as private spaces open to the public. These protections extend into the telecommunications and digital realm as well, including websites and apps.

Website accessibility refers to the process of designing websites so that the material does not create any barriers for people with disabilities as they receive the information. Website elements that provide accessibility include such things as keyboard-accessible navigation, a site design that works with screen reader programs, or text that is large enough and provides enough contrast that it remains readable to those with limited vision. Documents in Adobe’s Portable Document Format, or PDF, can require special attention to their formatting in order to provide accessibility.

Although accessibility requirements under the ADA are now undergoing updates, they are nothing new, and noncompliance can lead to lawsuits. A recent study by the digital legal compliance company Clym found that the first half of 2025 saw more than 2,000 website accessibility lawsuits filed, a 37% increase from the same period in 2024.

The U.S. Department of Justice’s final rule established that the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, or WCAG, Version 2.1, Level AA, sets the technical standard for web and mobile content, which municipalities must meet in most cases. These guidelines, available at www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag, address a huge number of topics for web and mobile app content, ranging from providing text alternatives for content that is not text-based, text legibility, alternatives for audio and website navigation assistance.

The final rule notes that some exceptions to the guidelines are allowable to help governments prioritize their most important content, like current or commonly used information, for accessibility. Exceptions include these:

- Archived web content that is outdated, not needed or repeated elsewhere — for example, water quality reports from years past.
- Preexisting, conventional electronic documents, such as old PDF files.
- Content posted by a third party, so long as the third party is not posting something on behalf of the government, such as the case of a contractor hired to design or manage a website.
- Individualized documents that are password-protected, like a water or tax bill.
- Preexisting social media posts.

The U.S. Department of Justice maintains a website for ADA issues at www.ada.gov. It details the steps that governments should take to begin complying with the accessibility rule, ranging from determining who on staff should be working on compliance, staff training, content review, changes needed to make the content ADA-compliant and policy development.

How to Manage Account Credentials During Municipal Staff Turnover

By *Dustin Tucker, Manager, Strategic Advisors, VC3*

Municipalities often face a unique technology challenge when staff or elected officials leave. Let's call it "account credential chaos." What does that mean?

As an example, think of an employee with a lot of responsibility. They not only have their email account but also access to various social media accounts, event websites and cloud-based applications and programs containing information critical to your daily operations and public communications.

Then, that employee abruptly leaves. You log into Facebook or a website for a big annual event or your permitting platform. And ... you're locked out because you don't have the username and password. In a worst-case scenario, a terminated employee with access to the account may not give it back to you, make an unauthorized post on social media or access sensitive emails.

How can your municipality prevent these issues? With proactive password and account credential management.

Why does turnover create credential risks?

Going back to our example above, municipalities often face two major problems when staff leave.

1. Critical accounts become inaccessible because credentials weren't properly documented or transferred.
2. Former employees or elected officials may still have active credentials.

These issues typically happen because

- you might not store credentials in a central, secure location.
- no formal offboarding process exists to revoke access from employees who leave or change roles.
- password changes are delayed, inconsistent or nonexistent.

Without a structured approach to credential management, you risk losing control over your digital presence, sensitive data and critical applications. Some practical steps that municipalities can take to improve their credential management include these:

- **Centralize credential storage:** Use a secure password management tool to store all of your account credentials in one encrypted location. Any authorized staff can access accounts without insecurely sharing passwords, and credentials are updated in real time.

- **Implement role-based access:** Assign individual logins where possible and use role-based permissions — meaning people only get access to the systems and information they need to do their job — so access can be easily be changed when someone leaves.
- **Enforce MFA and strong password policies:** Enable multi-factor authentication, or MFA, for critical accounts such as email and financial systems. Also, require complex passwords and periodic password changes.
- **Refine your offboarding process:** When an employee or elected official departs, make sure you immediately revoke their access to all systems, update any shared account passwords, and document these changes in your credential management system.
- **Regularly audit your accounts:** Periodically — such as quarterly — remove any unused or outdated accounts and confirm that only authorized personnel have access to your systems and applications. Better yet, have your IT resource automatically deactivate any unused accounts.
- **Continuously monitor for unusual account behavior:** Have your IT staff or vendor monitor for unusual account behavior such as people using unauthorized credentials. They should be able to automatically block access after an incident is flagged.
- **Detect cybercriminals using stolen "authorized" credentials:** Cybercriminals often obtain legitimate credentials, but log in from a suspicious device or unusual location. An identity management tool can block these types of logins by flagging suspicious contextual signs that indicate something is wrong.

Credential management may seem like a tedious task, but it's a cornerstone of municipal cybersecurity. By centralizing passwords, enforcing strong policies and formalizing your offboarding process, you can avoid the headaches and risks of account lockouts and unauthorized access.

VC3 is the Municipal Association of South Carolina's technology partner.



Municipal Association of South Carolina

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Calendar

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

MARCH

2 – 4 SC Utility Billing Association Annual Meeting. Beach House, Hilton Head Island. Topics include customer service, the Municipal Association's Local Revenue Services and the five generations currently at work.

4 SC Business Licensing Officials Association Spring Training and Advanced Academy. Seawell's, Columbia. Topics include business licensing procedures, Act 176, decoding the assessment process, updates on business licensing court cases and managing stress and workplace burnout.

5 Business License Bootcamp. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia. Topics include the history of the business license tax, Act 176, a business license ordinance model, processing business licenses, appeals and assessments, and resources.

12 SC Association of Stormwater Managers First Quarter Meeting. Seawell's, Columbia.

17 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government Basic Budgeting and Municipal Finance. Located at all of the five regional Councils of Governments locations. Topics will include the responsibilities of an elected official, revenues and expenditures, financial controls and accountability, audit requirements and the roles in municipal finance.

19 Municipal Technology Association of SC Spring Meeting. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia.

24 Palmetto Power Cities Association Member Lunch. CEEUS, West Columbia.

24 Risk Management Services: Defensive Driving Training. City of Mauldin Fire Department Headquarters.

26 Managers' and Administrators' Spring Forum. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia.

APRIL

9 SC Municipal Finance Officers, Clerks, and Treasurers Association Spring Academy. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia.

10 Municipal Court Administration Association Spring Meeting. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia.

16 Risk Management Services: Public Works Training. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia.

23 SC Municipal Human Resources Association Spring Meeting. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia.

30 Association of SC Mayors Breakfast. State House Room 112, Blatt Building, Columbia

MAY

6 – 8 SC Community Development Association Annual Meeting. Hyatt Place, Florence Downtown.

12 Risk Management Services: Public Safety Training. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia.

19 Municipal Court Administration Association 2.0 and Know Your Role Training. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

19 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government Municipal Governance and Policy and Freedom of Information Act in SC. Located at the five regional Councils of Governments locations.

19 Business Licensing Essentials Webinar. Virtual.