

UPTOWN



a publication of the Municipal Association of South Carolina

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Cover Photo:
After two years of construction and
\$25 million of revitalization work, the
City of Columbia staged the grand
reopening of its downtown Finlay Park
in November 2025.
Photo: City of Columbia.



Advocacy Isn't a Spectator Sport

Municipal government is where public policy becomes personal. Water, sewer, police, fire, sanitation, parks and zoning are overwhelmingly local services that residents see and use every day.

Still, many of the forces shaping municipal operations originate at the State House. As such, municipal officials cannot afford to be passive with state policymaking. A city's engagement with its legislative delegation is not politics for politics' sake, but is rather operational strategy, financial stewardship, risk management and service protection.

State decisions have local consequences

Every legislative session produces bills that ripple directly into municipal responsibilities. Property tax exemptions alter revenue streams, changes to utility regulation reshape infrastructure planning, and public safety mandates influence staffing and equipment needs. Land-use statutes affect zoning authority, while pension and benefits legislation alter long-term liabilities.

When municipal voices are absent from legislative discussions, it can create a situation where policymakers are not fully aware of the implications of their bills and statewide budgets for cities and towns.

Legislators value context

State legislators operate in a world of competing priorities and information overload. Most are not municipal finance officers or utility directors, and most have never balanced a city budget facing revenue limitations, inflation, aging infrastructure and escalating service demands. Municipal staff and elected officials can provide something uniquely valuable: practical, real-world consequences.

Explaining how a proposal affects police staffing, water rates or capital planning transforms legislation from theory into reality. Legislators consistently welcome clear, factual and nonpartisan input from local officials.

Effective advocacy requires partnerships

Throughout the legislative session and the rest of the year, the Municipal Association of SC advocacy team works on behalf of South Carolina's 271 cities and towns — monitoring legislation, analyzing fiscal impacts, educating policymakers and protecting municipal authority. Even so, the Association always needs local expertise, responsiveness and engagement.

NEWS BRIEFS

For local officials, partnering with the Association on advocacy begins with several fundamentals:

- **Responding to information requests** – Timely responses to the Association’s data requests help ensure municipal realities are reflected in legislative debates. The advocacy team often calls upon engaged municipalities to contact their legislators or to provide testimony at bill hearings.
- **Stay informed** – The *From the Dome to Your Home* podcast and legislative e-newsletter provide updates on essential bills affecting municipalities. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: Dome).
- **Participate in advocacy events** – Regional Advocacy Meetings and the Hometown Legislative Action Day offer strategic opportunities to engage legislators.
- **Communicate concerns** – An open dialogue with the Association’s advocacy staff is critical for information-sharing between Columbia and municipalities. Even details that seems small can help direct debate and change the course of legislation.

Engagement builds relationships

Effective advocacy is rarely transactional — it’s relational. Consistent engagement allows legislators to learn about local conditions, challenges and priorities.

Local officials can increase their effectiveness by personally inviting legislators to community events, recognizing them at council meetings or hosting joint discussions to share priorities and developments.

The most effective advocacy often occurs when the General Assembly is not in session, and so municipal officials can always help their case when they prioritize relationship building throughout the year — not just when there is a need or request.

Municipal advocacy is strongest when the Municipal Association and cities and towns work as a team, with local officials lending their expertise, responsiveness and voice to the process. When municipalities step up to the plate, the impact can be nothing short of a home run for the state’s residents.

The Riley Center for Livable Communities at the College of Charleston named the mayors who will participate in the eighth class of the Riley Mayors Design Fellowship. They are **Mayor Lethonia Barnes** of Florence, **Mayor Demetrius Chatman** of Winnsboro, **Mayor Jennifer Rushing** of Scotia, **Mayor Lisa Talbert** of Easley, **Mayor Russ Touchberry** of Summerville and **Mayor Jeffrey Washington** of North.

The Municipal Court Administration Association of SC recognized eight new graduates of its “MCAA 101” courses, which provide the staff of municipal courts with the skills critical to their positions. The new graduates are **Hannah Burton**, City of Clemson; **Angela Cartrette**, City of North Charleston; **Andrea Coleman**, City of Lancaster; **Stacey Cook**, Town of Jefferson; **Lauren Fernandes**, City of North Charleston; **Brittany Peay**, City of Columbia; **Simone Withers**, City of Charleston; and **Pinky Williams**, City of Cayce.

Save the Date for the 2026 Municipal Association of SC Annual Meeting

The 2026 Annual Meeting of the Municipal Association of South Carolina is happening July 15 – 19 at the Hyatt Regency in Greenville.

The Association uses a dedicated process for attendee registration which ensures that municipal officials throughout the state have priority for the limited available reservations and ticketed events. From May 5 to May 29, cities and towns can enter the drawing for registration appointments. The Association will use a random drawing of these cities and towns on June 1 to determine the order of registration appointments.

Details on registration and Annual Meeting conference sessions will appear in upcoming issues of *Uptown*, and online at www.masc.sc (keyword: Annual Meeting).



Tax Season Brings Increased Risk of Financial Transaction Scams

The city's finance department receives an invoice marked with the name of one of the city's vendors, and the department proceeds with issuing payment. The sender of the invoice, however, was fraudulently posing as a representative of the vendor, but now funds have been paid, and cannot be recovered.

This type of scenario is known as wire fraud, in which someone uses some type of electronic communication, such as email, internet, phone or wire transfer, to defraud a victim. As finance offices navigate the busy tax season with its increase in activity involving W-2 and 1099 forms, vendor payments and year-end reconciliations, they face increased risks of fraud as well. Cybercriminals are aware of these additional pressures placed on staff, and they may aim to exploit a sense of urgency in order to bypass internal finance controls.

To help reduce these risks, cities and towns can review their processes for payment changes and fund transfers for vulnerabilities — especially callback procedures, and dual-authorization requirements.

Callback verification

Any request received to establish new payment instructions or modify existing vendor payment information should trigger a mandatory callback verification, which helps determine the legitimacy of payment requests.

Staff should

- Independently contact the vendor using a known and previously verified phone number.
- Never rely on contact information provided within an email.
- Avoid replying directly to emailed requests requesting changes to payment instructions.

Dual authorization

Dual authorization involves requiring approval from two people, and is a valuable safety tool for all financial transactions, especially those involving electronic funds transfers. This layer of oversight can help prevent fraud from occurring because of a single point of failure, and makes impersonation attempts by a would-be fraudster less likely to succeed.

Tiered confirmation and escalation protocols

Staff cannot always immediately verify a payment request, and when this happens, a tiered verification approach can help. If an employee finds that they cannot complete a callback and seeks validation of the payment request's legitimacy from another employee, then that employee should independently confirm that the city's set protocols are followed before any payment is remitted. The staff should never bypass the verification process or assume that other employees have handled it.

The city can also establish an escalation process to use in any event where an employee completes a callback, but still has suspicions, or is even uncertain about the payment request. The city would keep the transaction paused until all of the concerns are resolved.

Preventing financial loss requires rules and diligence

Financial controls for verification and authorization, when established and followed consistently, are among the most effective defenses against email compromise and wire fraud schemes. They are designed not only to prevent unauthorized transactions, but also to counter social engineering tactics that rely on urgency, familiarity and trust.

For questions about internal financial controls, contact the Municipal Association of SC Risk Management Services Loss Control at losscontrol@masc.sc.

Attorney General Opinion Provides Administrative Search Warrant Guidance



Many municipal ordinances regulate the activities or conditions allowed inside privately owned structures. Health and safety ordinances, for example, address items like building, electrical or plumbing codes; while planning codes regulate matters like the number of people who may inhabit a residential structure.

Because the conditions inside can spill over to the outside, the city may need to inspect the interior. Consider a home in a single-family residential zoning district that suddenly starts to look like a boarding house from the outside. Cars now line the street, trash bins are overflowing, noise complaints arise. These facts suggest that more than a single family occupies the premises, but a municipal officer will need to inspect the interior to be sure.

But what if the owner of the home refuses to allow entry for inspection?

Search warrants in general

Both the U.S. and South Carolina constitutions guard against “unreasonable” searches and seizures. In many cases, a reasonable search must be based on probable cause and “supported by Oath or affirmation ... particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.” A municipal officer almost always needs a warrant to enter the home over the owner’s objection.

Administrative search warrants

Most search warrants arise in the context of criminal investigations. Law enforcement may be looking for contraband, evidence of a crime or stolen property. A zoning-related search usually isn’t a criminal matter. If a violation is found, the remedy is usually civil — for example a notice of violation or an administrative order to comply with the zoning ordinance.

The United States has recognized the category of “administrative search warrants.” Federal, state and even local agencies use these kinds of warrants with some regularity, for example, in the context of food or workplace safety inspections. The U.S. Supreme Court has held that the warrant requirement still attaches to these types of searches, but applies a different standard. In the 1967 decision *Camara v. Municipal Court*, an administrative inspection warrant requires a modified form of probable cause. Under this test, if a valid public interest justifies the intrusion, if reasonable legislative or administrative standards are satisfied, and if the warrant is suitably restricted to the regulatory purpose, then probable cause exists.

Who can issue administrative search warrants?

The SC Attorney General’s office recently considered this question. In an opinion issued on November 19, 2025, the Attorney General emphasized that the power to issue search warrants requires explicit, and not implied, statutory authorization. The Attorney General then reviewed existing state statutes to see if any of them authorized the issuance of administrative search warrants to allow inspection of a building’s structural integrity.

The Attorney General found no such authorization in place: “To read warrant authorization into a statute where it does not exist would usurp the province of the legislature. We do not believe a court would add the desired language to the statute and we will not attempt to do so. Of course, if local officials need administrative search warrants to effectively regulate unfit dwellings, our General Assembly can provide that authority.”

Practical suggestions

The Attorney General opinion leaves open an important question — if a property owner refuses entry for a regulatory or administrative inspection, what options are available to the municipality?

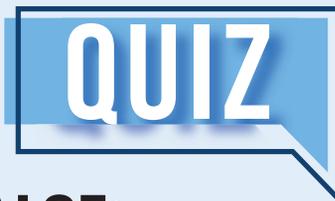
There are no definitive answers to the question under current law. The most promising response would be to designate a municipal recorder under SC Code Section 14-25-115. By law, the recorder has the power “to issue summonses, subpoenas, arrest warrants, and search warrants in all cases arising under the ordinances of the municipality...”

When discussing this statute, the Attorney General has reserved judgment of whether a general reference to “search warrants” includes administrative search warrants. Assuming the recorder has the authority to issue administrative search warrants, a municipality could appoint a person to this role and ensure that all required warrant requests are routed through that person.

There are other untested options. A municipality might purport to authorize the issuance of administrative search warrants by local ordinance. There are municipalities in South Carolina whose codes of ordinances specifically authorize the issuance of such warrants in appropriate circumstances. The courts have not directly ruled on whether such authorizations are sufficient by themselves. Municipalities considering such an ordinance should carefully consult with the municipal attorney.

Regardless of the warrant issue, there are some general guidelines municipalities should follow in inspecting properties.

- **Build the case without entry when possible.** Exterior observations from lawful vantage points, photos, permit history, prior inspection records, complaints and sworn statements often carry an enforcement case.
- **If entry is required, focus on voluntary access and maintain a clear paper trail.** Explain the reason for the visit, ask for permission and document the refusal. It helps to offer reasonable scheduling options in writing.
- **Remember that the warrant requirement contains a limited exception for emergencies.** Immediate threats to life or property can justify entry without a warrant. Remember that “emergency” here means real danger, not administrative frustration.



TRUE OR FALSE:

A municipal council can amend or repeal a previously adopted ordinance using a resolution.

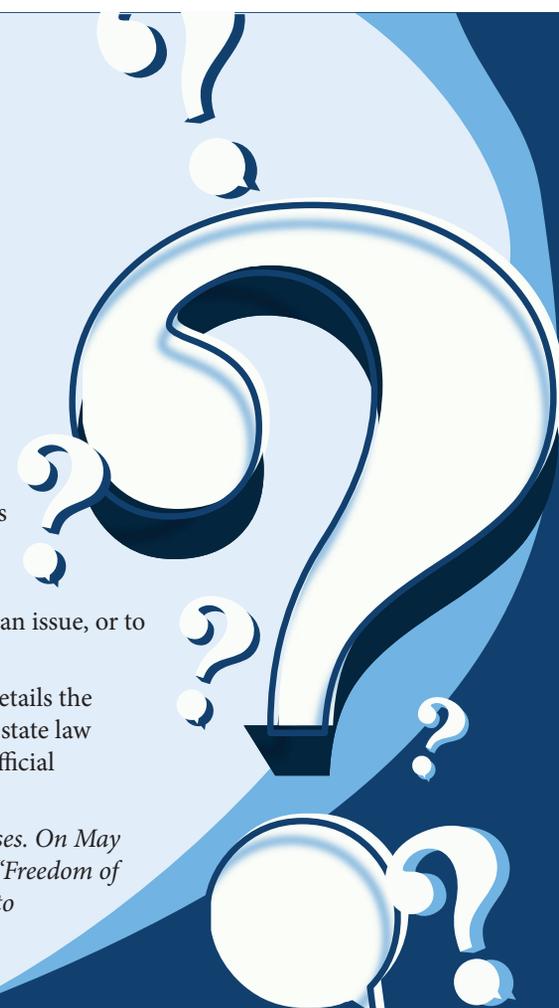
FALSE A council can amend or repeal an adopted municipal ordinance only by adopting another ordinance.

Councils enact ordinances any time they seek to create or modify a law that would be broadly applicable and have a long-lasting effect. Ordinances require at least two readings on two separate days with at least six days between each reading before they can have the force of law. Afterward, they must be placed into the municipal code.

Resolutions, however, are generally used by councils to express a policy or position on an issue, or to bring emphasis to an issue.

The Municipal Association of SC *Handbook for Municipal Officials in South Carolina* details the differences between ordinances and resolutions, including all of the circumstances when state law requires an ordinance for a council to act. Find it at www.masc.sc (keyword: municipal official handbook.)

The Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government offers in-person and online courses. On May 19, the institute will offer in-person sessions “Municipal Governance and Policy” as well as “Freedom of Information Act in SC” at several regional councils of governments locations. The deadline to register for these is May 11. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: MEOI).



Making Parks a Priority

Funding and Upgrades Keep Facilities Vibrant

Renovations to Columbia's Mays Park in 2025 included a new splash pad, new pickleball courts, tennis courts, a basketball tree, playgrounds and a rain garden. Photo: City of Columbia.

Parks and greenspaces play a vital role in communities throughout South Carolina. From the natural beauty they offer to their health and wellness benefits, and to their many recreational opportunities, municipalities are making parks a priority.

Three cities that aim to provide their parks with thoughtful, community-driven upgrades and amenities are Columbia, Fountain Inn and Isle of Palms, giving their parks the planning and the regular funding they need to thrive in the long-term.

Columbia

Last fall, Kenya Bryant took the helm as director of parks and recreation for the state's capital city, and now handles a substantial inventory of parks.

"We have 65-plus parks throughout the city, and that ranges from what we call community recreation centers, which are gymnasiums, community centers, activity rooms, baseball fields, swimming pools and a walking track," Bryant said. "We [also] have maintenance units — more of a pocket park in a neighborhood, so you might have one building there for the neighborhood needs, and also a playground and some other amenities right in the middle of the community ... We also have our regional parks, which are our larger parks."

Perhaps the most notable is Finlay Park in the heart of the downtown, which received an extensive, \$25-million revitalization lasting two and a half years, and which reopened last November. Other recent projects included the revitalization of Mays Park and the opening of the new Randall Avenue Park. Managing so many parks requires collaboration, Bryant explained.

"Collaboration between our community, engaging our agencies; working with the community, which is very important, and working with council. Then the other piece is our staff — we want staff feedback. They are out there doing routine inspections

and routine maintenance, so they can identify hazards or what needs improvements."

In April 2025, Columbia adopted its 10-year Parks and Recreation Plan, which incorporated community feedback through an extensive public relations campaign, including focus groups and surveys.

Maintaining such a large roster of parks and recreational spaces requires 170 full-time staff, in addition to part-time and seasonal staffers. Bryant noted that his department works closely with city council and sources project funding for projects through a series of state and federal grants, as well as through its Parks and Recreation Foundation. The city recently partnered with Prisma Health and the National Fitness Campaign to open four outdoor fitness courts throughout the city, and it recently announced plans for new waterfront park development along the Congaree River.

"I have a great joy of seeing things into fruition and working through this process and working with the community to get things done," he shared. "Our city manager and council have been very supportive; people are seeing great things happening in Columbia right now and I am just happy to be a part of it."

Fountain Inn

In the Upstate, the City of Fountain Inn also recently had its parks and recreation master plan approved. Assistant City Administrator Russell Slatton oversees all city construction projects, including park maintenance and expansions. He discussed the reinvigorated Sanctified Hill Park, which is the site of the city's latest park project, and the subject of a Municipal Association of SC Achievement Award win.

"It wasn't much of a park to begin with," Slatton said. "It had some basketball hoops and some swings. The community really came together and started pushing to have this park revitalized."

The city obtained funding from Laurens County and other sources, making the rebuild possible.

“[We] were able to design a new park, and to get the whole thing overhauled,” he said.

Fountain Inn added new bathrooms, refinished and illuminated the two basketball courts, installed a walking track and an accessible playground.

“We worked with a local team, Studio Main, which is Blake Sanders and his team, who put it together. First off, [they determined what they could] do with the property, and then threw out some ideas of what we wanted in a park,” he said. “They just did a really good job of incorporating everything the community wanted.”

The city also hosted a community block party to garner public input and make sure the finished product was what residents wanted.

“We were lucky enough to get some of those [projects] taken care of but now we have some of our other parks that are in dire need, and we have some tennis courts that need resurfacing,” Slatton said. “Price points get difficult sometimes because we may have grant money to do a smaller project but no grant money to do a bigger one. So, it’s really about timing and what’s available through the grant process and what the city has set aside for the upgrading or expansion of any parks.”

Slatton works closely with city council on park-related efforts, briefing them on upcoming projects and receiving direction and input. Managing the city’s seven parks involves a team of three dedicated parks and recreation staff members.

“I would say that they’re the most dedicated individuals I’ve ever seen,” he said. “We only have three people, with a supervisor and two workers, and they just do a fantastic job of keeping the parks clean.”

As for new parks on the horizon, Slatton said that space is limited.

“One of the issues that we have with a growing community like Fountain Inn is that we’re running out of recreation space really quickly,” he said. “We are having to partner with churches and other entities within the city that have gym space and field space.”

He added that the city is looking toward buying land for parks.

“We haven’t secured the location yet, and we haven’t secured any funding, but we do recognize that we’re going to have to start building some more fields to accommodate the needs of Fountain Inn.”

Isle of Palms

Down in the Lowcountry, the City of Isle of Palms manages several municipal parks.

“[What] we consider our primary park is the recreation department and its associated grounds,” said City Administrator Douglas Kerr. “That is kind of a full-fledged rec department – soccer fields, basketball courts, pickleball courts, tennis courts.”

The city also owns the Isle of Palms Marina, which has a new public dock facility, and Kerr said the city is planning for a greenspace on the high ground alongside it. Although there is still some preparatory work to be done before the project gets off the ground, there is already a conceptual design in the works.

“We don’t fully have all of the parts in place to make that happen just yet, but we think it’s going to be soon,” Kerr shared.

Other recent projects included the removal, replacement, and update of an existing playground and its equipment in early 2025.

Parks are a high priority with city council, Kerr said.

“Prior to [the marina dock and greenspace,] it was the playground equipment; prior to that it was adding pickleball courts. Really, almost every council meeting, there is some discussion of keeping those facilities in top condition,” he said.



Mayor GP McLeer, joined by Fountain Inn councilmembers and officials, cuts the ribbon at the renovated Sanctified Hill Park in 2023. Photo: City of Fountain Inn.



*The City of Isle of Palms opened a new public dock at the Isle of Palms Marina in 2025.
Photo: City of Isle of Palms.*

Funding for the marina dock project was provided through a mix of American Rescue Plan Act funds, tourism funds, and the city's general fund.

"In addition to the very active recreation center in the middle of the island and the public dock, there are a lot of more passive recreation opportunities," Kerr said. "We do focus pretty heavily on giving the public access to the ocean — the greatest public park that we have — so there is a lot of focus on ensuring that the public can enjoy the beaches."

He added that the city recently added beach access boardwalks that have Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility.

Many city and town parks and greenspaces are receiving the attention and care they need in South Carolina. With an emphasis on adequate funding, staff and regular upgrades, and by garnering community input for new and existing spaces, municipalities will continue to see their residents and visitors putting them to good use.

Recreational Use Statute Offers Broad Protections, Some Limitations

Cities and towns regularly allow the public to use municipal property for recreation. In South Carolina, such property ranges from neighborhood parks and greenways to sports complexes, multi-use trails, and waterways with fishing or boating access. Unfortunately, injuries sometimes occur in recreational activities, and municipalities might ask themselves whether opening public property for recreation exposes them to liability.

Since 1962, South Carolina law has largely answered that question in the negative. Found in SC Code Section 27-3-10, the Recreational Use Statute is expressly intended "to encourage owners of land to make land and water areas available to the public for recreational purposes by limiting their liability toward persons entering thereon for such purposes."

Generally, the statute indicates that a landowner who allows the public to use land for recreational purposes without charge owes no duty of care to those users. In other words, the owner allowing use of the property is not representing that the property is safe, and does not assume responsibility for injuries caused by conditions on the property.

Special Section: Parks and Recreation

The statute applies to all landowners, including local governments. A municipality that opens a park, trail or lake enjoys the same legal protections as a private owner.

South Carolina courts have consistently construed the statute broadly, and have frequently upheld immunity. Even so, that protection is subject to important limitations:

- The injured person must have been using the property for a recreational purpose.
- The owner must not have charged for that use.
- The law does not shield gross negligence, nor does it shield willful or malicious conduct.

Recreational purposes

In SC Code Section 27-3-20(D), the statute defines “recreational purposes” to include, but not to be limited to, “hunting, fishing, swimming, boating, camping, picnicking, hiking, pleasure driving, nature study, water skiing, summer and winter sports, aviation activities, and viewing or enjoying historical, archaeological, scenic, or scientific sites.”

In many cases, the question of whether an activity is considered “recreational” is straightforward. Municipal parks, greenways, trails, sports fields, and similar facilities are plainly intended as recreational properties. Even low-intensity activities like walking, sitting or picnicking are within the statute’s scope.

When the property serves more than one function, however, the question becomes more complex. The Recreational Use Statute may not apply to property that the public uses not only for recreation but also for commercial or governmental activities. Facilities that generate revenue, host programmed or ticketed events, or are closely integrated into day-to-day municipal operations can present harder questions about whether the land is truly being held open for recreational purposes alone.

For example, in the 2011 case *Harris v. University of South Carolina*, the Court of Appeals considered whether the statute applied to injuries sustained on a boardwalk located on a university-owned island that served multiple purposes, including recreational beach access and university education and research activities. The court focused on the plaintiff’s purpose in entering the property and concluded that, because the visit was recreational, the statute applied.

Charging for use

The Recreational Use Statute does not apply if the landowner charges a fee for the recreational use itself. Charging an admission charge to access a facility like a park or trail is likely to invalidate the law’s protections.

Still, a charge for something ancillary to the recreational use — such as vehicle parking — likely would not invalidate the protections, especially if the recreational land remains freely accessible to the public on foot or by other means. In that case, the owner is not conditioning the recreational use itself on payment.

Although South Carolina courts have not exhaustively explored the question, the statute’s focus on charges “for the recreational use” supports a distinction between true admission fees and incidental costs unrelated to the activity itself.

Gross negligence

The statute protects landowners from liability for ordinary negligence, but not for gross negligence, or willful or malicious conduct.

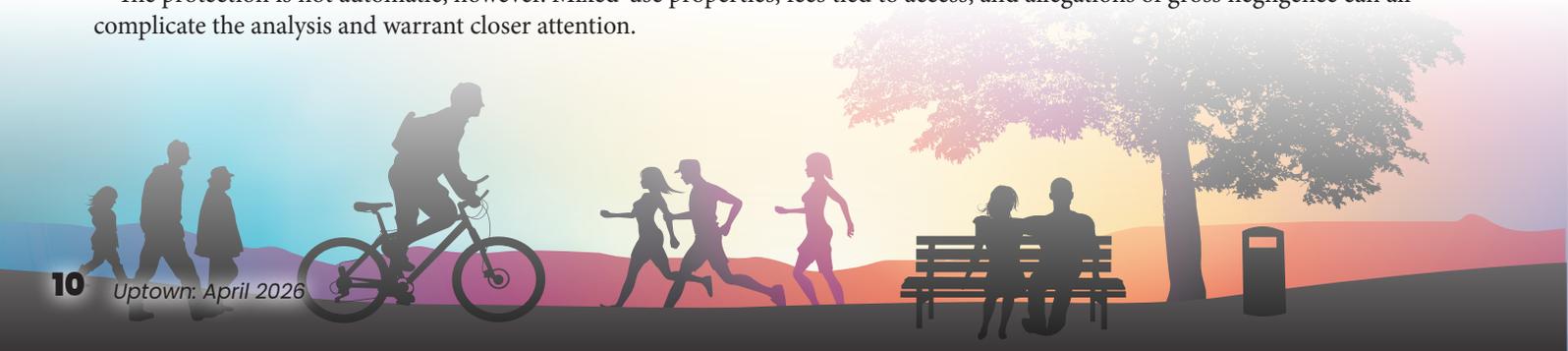
The South Carolina Supreme Court has described gross negligence as a conscious or intentional failure to do something the owner is obligated to do, or the intentional doing of something that should not be done. The Fourth Circuit has explained that a willful failure to guard or warn requires actual knowledge of a concealed condition posing an unreasonable risk of death or serious bodily harm, coupled with a deliberate decision not to act despite that knowledge. However, the courts have made clear that claims for gross negligence cannot be based on a duty to inspect, or on constructive notice, which is a legal concept that assumes that an owner should have known of a danger in a situation where a reasonably diligent person would have known.

In plain terms, this means that landowners with actual notice of a manifestly dangerous condition, structure, or activity should take reasonable steps to address or mitigate the risk.

Property owners should consider nuances

For municipalities, the Recreational Use Statute is a powerful and often dispositive protection. It reflects a legislative judgment that communities should not be penalized for opening land to the public for recreation.

The protection is not automatic, however. Mixed-use properties, fees tied to access, and allegations of gross negligence can all complicate the analysis and warrant closer attention.



Athletic Complexes Make Life Better – for Residents and Tourists Alike

Darlington's revamped Blue Street Sports Complex has five recreational ballfields, as well as two fields and a tennis court for Darlington High School. Photo: City of Darlington.

Sports tourism is big business — and getting bigger every year — as cities in every corner of South Carolina recognize the economic and quality-of-life impacts of recreation centers. Some recent examples of these kinds of developments can be found in Rock Hill, North Myrtle Beach, Darlington and Woodruff.

Rock Hill

The City of Rock Hill was one of the first cities in the state to see the importance and value in sports tourism, starting in the 1980s. It has kept up the momentum in the decades since.

“I think it's a testament to the leadership that's in Rock Hill, from a council standpoint and a management standpoint,” said Mark Sexton, the city's director of parks, recreation and tourism. “You look at the leaders in Rock Hill back in the in the '80s, when the textile industry was starting to go away. They were trying to really diversify and trying to figure out what was the next big thing. Our leadership at that time said, ‘Okay, the textile mills are shutting down. What are we going to do?’ It was highly controversial. When they built Cherry Park in the '80s, it was a four-to-three vote on city council, that's how close it was. And if that facility had not been successful, I don't think anything

we're talking about [now] would have happened.”

But Cherry Park — a 68-acre complex built primarily for baseball and softball — was highly successful. Its pinwheel design, with fields spread around a tower placed in the middle, was among the first of its kind in the Southeast. Now, designs of this type are everywhere.

“That started the softball and baseball push for sports tourism and we hosted some very large events — the [National Softball Association] World Series, some Dixie Boys World Series, upwards of 688 teams from all over United States and Canada,” Sexton said.

That led to an additional facility with four more baseball fields across the street. Then, with the help of the hospitality tax, there was a push to open a tennis center. A few years later, the city opened

Manchester Meadows, a 68-acre park just off Interstate 77 for large-scale, high-profile soccer tournaments.

“When that facility opened up [in 2006] we really started seeing the big economic impact from youth sports tourism, beyond just softball and baseball,” Sexton said. “We hosted national tournaments, soccer, lacrosse. We've done the Quidditch World Championships there. We've done rugby.”

The next frontier was cycling — with the Velodrome opening in 2012 and a BMX super cross track in 2014 — drawing national and international attention. 2019 saw the arrival of the Rock Hill Sports and Events Center, a 170,000-square foot facility near downtown used primarily for basketball and volleyball, which also features event space and hosts events from boxing to gymnastics. In 2025, the



Rock Hill's Bleachery Fieldhouse has four basketball courts that can serve as eight volleyball courts, and 12 pickleball courts. Photo: City of Rock Hill.



Woodruff's in-development, 103-acre Riverbend Athletic Complex is slated to open in 2027. Photo: City of Woodruff.

Bleachery Fieldhouse provided more basketball, volleyball and pickleball courts, and the city is now in the design stage of a new 80-plus acre regional park.

Sexton said Rock Hill's success —with a direct economic impact growing from \$43 million in 2005 – 2009 to \$407 million from 2020 – 2024 — can be linked to several things, including the addition of “tourism” to the parks and recreation department name in 1988. That made the department the destination marketing organization for the City of Rock Hill, providing it the authority to market and sell the city's facilities to outside organizations. Also, he said, the city has committed to maintaining facilities at a high level.

“You've got to have a good quality staff that can work together — your sales team, working with your maintenance team, working with your recreational programs, being all in it together,” he said. “Tourism is a big portion of what we do, and we're all hands on deck in understanding that we're in a competitive market, and that means that the way somebody looks at trash on the roads is important, and the way somebody feels welcomed into our city is important, and if somebody walks into a bathroom and it's not clean is important.”

North Myrtle Beach

In North Myrtle Beach, the city capitalized on its coastal location and

climate as it stepped into the sports tourism market.

The North Myrtle Beach Park and Sports Complex opened in 2014 with six baseball and softball fields, eight soccer or multipurpose fields, seven picnic shelters, two dog parks, three playgrounds, an amphitheater and 3 miles of walking trails. A private company leases land to run a wakeboarding park at the complex. In addition to events including concerts, festivals and a Christmas drive-through light show, the park hosts about 50 sports tourism events each year, said Matt Gibbons, parks and recreation director for North Myrtle Beach.

“When we're not doing sports tourism events, it's a community park, so people walk there every day. And we've got about 2,000 kids that play youth sports there. A typical week would be Monday to Thursday night, every field would be taken with our youth sports. And then on the weekend the sports tourism events come in,” Gibbons said. “It wasn't long after we opened the complex that the city decided to expand it, and we bought 91 acres directly adjacent to it.”

The second phase of complex, which opened in 2026, added soccer, baseball and softball fields and another 2 miles of trails. Gibbons said the first phase generates about \$30 million a year in direct economic impact, with another \$12 – \$15 million expected with the addition.

Baseball and softball are the biggest drivers, with tournaments nearly every weekend drawing teams from around the country. In March, about 120 college softball teams came to play during Spring Break. Gibbons said that spring trainings continue to grow during this “shoulder season.”

“A lot are from the Northeast, like Pennsylvania and New Jersey,” he said. It might be 50 degrees, but they're in the pools and they're on the beach. Most of them haven't stepped foot on their fields at home yet because of the weather.”

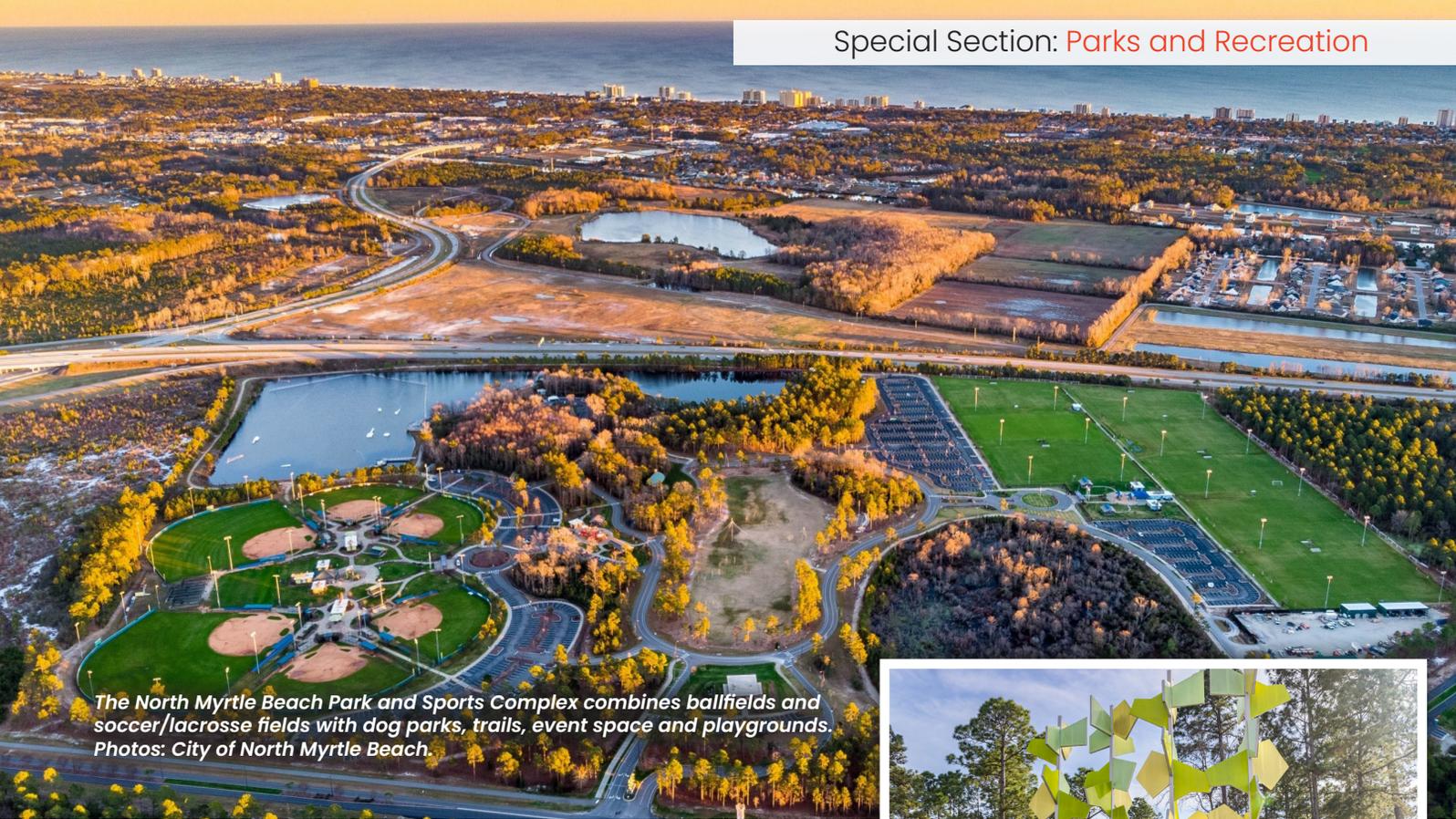
Construction will soon begin on the city's \$6.2 million pickleball complex. The city is also home to a membership-based facility with a gym, basketball courts, after-school programs and summer camp, that celebrates its 20th year, with plans for an expansion in the near future.

Gibbons described the complex's success as coming from it being a multi-use facility.

“We're busy seven days a week. There's no downtime, whereas if you don't have a recreational side to it, they might sit empty for four days during the week waiting on the tournaments to get here on the weekend,” he said.

Darlington

In Darlington, the Blue Street Sports Complex, home to softball and baseball fields, opened in the 1970s. Over the



The North Myrtle Beach Park and Sports Complex combines ballfields and soccer/lacrosse fields with dog parks, trails, event space and playgrounds. Photos: City of North Myrtle Beach.

years, some facilities deteriorated and were no longer functioning.

“We were in dire need of something new,” said Lee Andrews, the Darlington County parks, recreation and tourism director, who works with the municipalities in the county.

When he was hired in 2013, he was tasked with finding a location for a new sports complex location that could fit five or six fields on it. The City of Darlington eventually decided to renovate what it already had — a good deal, because the sports complex sits on the land the school district owns and leases to the city. The complex, which is on the back side of the high school property, reopened last year and now is home to five recreation fields for baseball and softball, in addition to the high school’s facilities.

“We made everything brand new out there, from bathroom buildings to concessions to fencing and lighting,” Andrews said. “Plus, the school district built a brand new high school baseball field for Darlington High and renovated the softball field at the same time and put in a lighted practice soccer field, plus six tennis courts. And it’s all for public use when it’s not being used by the school.”

The fields host Little League softball and baseball games during the season, along with tournaments and events like movie nights and concerts.

“The main thing it was built for is for our citizens as their baseball and softball fields. They practice there and they play there. But this year, we’ve got 22 tournaments scheduled out there. So, we’re banking on some tourism dollars brought into the City of Darlington,” he said. “There is a little bit of pride in the complex when you see people come out there. We were fortunate enough to host a couple of our Little League All Star tournaments out there last year, and everybody was really impressed with the facility.”

Woodruff

In Woodruff, the Riverbend Athletic Complex, a 103-acre facility with synthetic turf fields, will open in summer 2027, and already has its own preview website — www.riverbendathleticcomplex.com. It will feature four full-sized baseball fields that can accommodate baseball, soccer, softball, lacrosse and flag football. It will also have lighted pickleball courts, a dog park, walking trails along the Enoree



River, a kayak launch and a destination playground with picnic shelters, said Lee Bailey, Woodruff city manager.

“The Riverbend Athletic Complex is about investing in the young people of our community. As our community continues to grow, we have a responsibility to create spaces where our children and families can thrive,” Bailey said. “This complex will give our youth more opportunities to play, grow and create memories.”

The complex is intended to host a wide range of activities, Bailey said.

“The complex is being built to serve our residents and provide the youth with high-quality recreational opportunities close to home. At the same time, the facility is designed to attract tournaments and regional events that will draw visitors into our community,” he said. “Those events bring teams and families who support our downtown businesses. It positions Woodruff as a destination for sports tourism and economic growth.”

Plan Ahead for Alcohol-related Risks at Parks and Events

Community events, festivals and gatherings in city-owned parks and facilities are powerful tools for community engagement. They activate public spaces, support local businesses and strengthen community identity. Whether in a large city or a small town, local governments can host these events successfully and safely by approaching them with structured planning — especially when alcohol is involved.

Special events inherently shift the operational risk profile of public property. Temporary stages, tents, food vendors, increased foot traffic and extended hours introduce exposures that do not exist during routine park use. Injuries may result from slips and falls as a result of inadequate lighting, weather-related hazards, crowd surges, electrical cords, cooking equipment and property damage.

When alcohol is added to the environment, the severity and frequency of incidents often increase. Altercations, falls, vandalism and impaired driving after the event can all create liability concerns for the host municipality.

Set the rules

The first step in managing alcohol-related risk at parks and city facilities is governance alignment. Municipalities should verify that their ordinances permit alcohol possession, sale or consumption in public parks. Many communities have longstanding prohibitions that may conflict with current event practices. If alcohol is to be allowed either for specific permitted events or within a designated hospitality district, ordinances and park rules should clearly reflect that authorization and define any limitations.

Beyond planning, structure becomes essential. A formal special event application process allows staff to evaluate risk before approval. Applications should require disclosure of anticipated attendance, alcohol service plans, vendor information, security arrangements and site layout. This documentation establishes expectations and creates a defensible record that the municipality exercised reasonable oversight.

Require insurance

Insurance is a critical safeguard. Event organizers or alcohol vendors should provide proof of general liability and liquor

liability coverage, naming the municipality as an additional insured. For events where alcohol is provided but not sold, the city needs to require host liquor liability coverage. Written agreements should include indemnification provisions and compliance requirements with all applicable state and local alcohol regulations.

Use safeguards

Operational controls are where municipalities can significantly reduce exposure. Alcohol service should be limited to licensed and insured vendors using trained bartenders. Responsible beverage service training equips servers to properly check identification, recognize signs of intoxication and refuse service when necessary. Strict ID verification procedures reduce the risk of underage drinking—one of the most serious triggers of liability. Clear policies prohibiting self-serve alcohol stations or unmanaged coolers further limit risk.

Enforce the rules

Equally important to rules and safeguards is defining and enforcing boundaries. If a hospitality district or designated drinking area exists within a park or downtown setting, those geographic limits need to be clearly marked. Signage, fencing, wristband systems or controlled entry points help ensure alcohol remains within approved zones. When boundaries are unclear, enforcement becomes inconsistent and exposure will increase.

Importantly, these measures are scalable. Larger municipalities may have dedicated risk management or parks staff, while smaller communities may rely on a clerk, administrator or parks director to coordinate approvals. Regardless of size, standardized checklists, template agreements and clear communication with event organizers can create effective safeguards without excessive administrative burden.

Alcohol at city-owned parks does not have to be avoided to be managed responsibly. With ordinance verification, structured approvals, appropriate insurance, trained servers, defined hospitality boundaries and consistent enforcement, municipalities can balance celebration with stewardship — ensuring public spaces remain vibrant, welcoming and well protected.

Playground Safety Requires Good Design, Maintenance and Inspections

CAUTION

Playgrounds are among the most visible symbols of community investment for a city or town. They promote wellness, connection and childhood development. However, they also represent a measurable liability exposure for local governments.

From a risk management perspective, playground safety is not simply a maintenance issue — it is a governance issue. Insurance claims history nationwide consistently shows that the majority of serious playground injuries result from falls to the surface below equipment. That reality should shape how municipalities design, inspect and maintain their facilities. Some other issues to be mindful of that can create increased exposure include broken playground equipment, inadequate ground cover under equipment, metal-surfaced play equipment that may cause burns if exposed to the hot sun, mechanical rides and splash pads.

Surfacing is the primary risk control

If there is one factor that most directly influences the severity of playground injuries, it is surfacing below the equipment designed to reduce the impact of a fall. Equipment compliance alone does not reduce exposure if the protective surface system is inadequate.

Municipal leaders should make sure that the city is taking several precautions for playground falls:

- Appropriate surfacing materials have been installed based on fall height.
- Loose-fill materials are maintained at proper depths.
- Hard surfaces, such as concrete, asphalt or compacted soil are not present within fall zones.
- Surfacing inspections are documented and replenishment of surfacing materials is scheduled.

Standards are the baseline for defensibility

National standards published by the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and performance specifications developed by ASTM International, are widely recognized benchmarks.

Even when not mandated by state law, these standards establish what courts frequently interpret as “reasonable care” when deciding injury lawsuits. Failure to align with recognized safety guidance can create avoidable litigation exposure.

Age-appropriate design reduces foreseeable risk

Play areas need to be clearly separated and labeled for ages 2 – 5 and ages 5 – 12. Developmentally inappropriate equipment use increases the risk of falls and complicates supervision.

Clear signage, physical layout distinctions and staff awareness all help reduce foreseeable misuse. Risk reduction is not about eliminating activity — it’s about reducing predictable hazards.

Inspection protocols protect children and the municipality

Inspection logs should be retained in accordance with the municipality’s records retention policy, including these steps:

- **Frequent visual checks** for obvious hazards, vandalism or surfacing displacement.
- **Operational inspections** evaluating hardware, structural integrity and wear.
- **Annual comprehensive inspections.**

Environmental controls matter

Risk does not end with the play structure. Visibility, fencing, drainage and rule signage all contribute to safety outcomes.

Municipalities should also review local ordinances regarding alcohol use in parks. Where alcohol is permitted, special events and high-use periods may require enhanced monitoring. Impaired supervision can increase injury severity and complicate liability determinations.

Playgrounds should be places where children thrive and communities gather confidently. When local governments embed structured risk management practices into their operations, they protect both their citizens and their investments.

Safety is not accidental. It is the result of intentional oversight.

The SC Municipal Insurance and Risk Financing Fund provides its members with a parks and recreation toolkit. In addition to playground safety issues, it addresses concerns of parks and recreation personnel, the liability issues involved in fees and supervision, sports programs and other facility guidelines. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: SCMIRF).



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Calendar

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

APRIL

9 SC Municipal Finance Officers, Clerks, and Treasurers Association Spring Academy. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia. Topics include parliamentary procedures, single audits, municipal elections and the role of the clerk, fixed assets, workplace civility and special events in the City of West Columbia.

10 Municipal Court Administration Association Spring Meeting. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia. Topics include records retention, bond estreatments and SC Department of Motor Vehicles processes.

16 Risk Management Services: Public Works Training. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Airport, West Columbia. Topics include first aid, CPR, potholes and sidewalk risks, sewer backups and damaged water lines.

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 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.

JUNE

7 - 10 Palmetto Power Cities Annual Meeting. Sonesta Resort, Hilton Head Island.

9 - 11 Main Street SC Second Quarter Managers' Training/Summer Retreat. The Greenwood Arts Center.

16 Risk Management Services: Defensive Driving Training. Hardeeville Recreation Center.

18 SC Association of Stormwater Managers Second Quarter Meeting. Seawell's, Columbia.

25 ABL Exam. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

JULY

15 - 19 Municipal Association Annual Meeting. Hyatt Regency, Greenville.

AUGUST

4 Setoff Debt Program Annual Participation Training. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

6 Setoff Debt Program Interested Participants Training. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

12 Small Cities Summit. Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center.

13 ABL Exam. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

18 Business Licensing Essentials Webinar. Virtual.