UPT WN

USING VIDEO TO SPREAD THE WORD *page 10*

Financial Reports, Economic Interest Statements Due the First Part of Each Year *page 6*

Municipal Association Cooperative Purchasing Program Adds New Partner *page 7*

Social Media Moderation Needs Balance, Consistent Enforcement *page 12*

Join an Affiliate Association and Focus on Professional Development in 2026

Training, education and development have long been major goals of the Municipal Association of SC, both for the elected officials that serve the state's cities and towns, as well as municipal staff.

The Municipal Association provides numerous affiliate associations to serve this goal — professional development groups that are each dedicated to a specific area of municipal jobs, and that help officials serve their communities to the best of their ability.

For a nominal membership cost, these groups provide professionals with networking opportunities among their peers, as well as specialized training and conferences. They also provide online listserves to their members, allowing for the ongoing exchange of ideas, best practices and concerns.

Each of the affiliate associations has a board of directors elected from the group's membership. Municipal Association staff provide support to these boards.

Membership in the affiliate groups requires joining or renewing each year. Membership applications for each affiliate can be found on the Municipal Association's website, www.masc.sc, under "Education & Events."

Here are the affiliate associations available:

Association of South Carolina Mayors

ASCM provides opportunities for the mayors who are its members to more fully engage in advocating for issues that affect cities and towns, to network, to take part in educational activities and to share ideas and best practices.

Staff contact: Casey Fields, Director of Advocacy

Municipal Court Administration Association of SC

MCAA provides training for court administrators, clerks of court, municipal judges and other court administration employees. The Supreme Court of South Carolina Commission on Continuing Legal Education and Specialization and the Office of Victims Services recognize these workshops for continuing education credits. MCAA recently launched a mentoring program to foster professional development and share the skills necessary to navigate the duties of municipal court staff.

Staff contact: Lea Ann Mitchell, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

Municipal Technology Association of SC

MTASC exposes its members to a variety of technology systems, platforms and solutions. It offers training for IT staff, those with GIS responsibilities and employees working in other departments but whose duties include technology services.

Staff contact: Lea Ann Mitchell, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

Palmetto Power Cities

Palmetto Power Cities is the new name of the SC Association of Municipal Power Systems, which originally existed as a way for the state's electric cities to help one another during disasters. PPC emphasizes collaboration as a core organizational strength while also recognizing the vital role municipal power plays in South Carolina. Its new identity highlights the organization's commitment to adapting to industry changes while continuing to focus on mutual aid, advocacy efforts, education and shared expertise for our members and partners.

Staff contact: Adam Hedden, Palmetto Power Cities Manager

SC Association of Stormwater Managers

SCASM offers quarterly training on stormwater management policies and best practices. The SC Board of Professional Engineers and Land Surveyors recognizes the quarterly training sessions for continuing education credits.

Staff contact: Elizabeth Copeland, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

SC Business Licensing Officials Association

BLOA promotes best practices for administering the local business and professional license tax through training, networking and the Accreditation in Business Licensing and Masters in Business Licensing credentials.

Staff contact: Elizabeth Copeland, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

SC Community Development Association

SCCDA provides educational forums for its members to address economic and community development needs. Members come from local and state government as well as private industry, elected positions and volunteer positions.

Staff contact: Lea Ann Mitchell, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

SC Municipal Attorneys Association

The SCMAA annual meeting covers issues important to municipal attorneys, whether working as municipal staff or as a municipality's outside counsel. The Supreme Court of South Carolina Commission on CLE and Specialization approves this training session for continuing education credits. MAA does not have memberships, and the meetings are open to all South Carolina municipal attorneys.

Staff contact: Lea Ann Mitchell, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

SC Municipal Finance Officers, Clerks and Treasurers Association

MFOCTA training covers the diverse job responsibilities of its members. All of the training sessions qualify for a combination of continuing education credits for certified municipal clerks and certified public treasurers. MFOCTA sponsors the Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Institute with the Municipal Association and the Joseph P. Riley Jr. Center for Livable Communities.

Staff contact: Elizabeth Copeland, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

SC Municipal Human Resources Association

MHRA's main objectives are to promote sound personnel administration, encourage innovative programs and provide information and the opportunity to exchange ideas.

Staff contact: Lea Ann Mitchell, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

SC Utility Billing Association

SCUBA provides training and networking opportunities for its members, including billing clerks, meter readers and department managers. SCUBA's meetings encompass a variety of topics focused on customer service, safety in the workplace and new technologies to increase the efficiencies of utility billing and collections.

Staff contact: Ken Ivey, Director of Member Services

Current members of each affiliate association received a renewal email in December. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: affiliate).

NEWS BRIEFS

The SC Association of Stormwater Managers elected its 2026 board of directors. They are President **Brandon Wagner**, stormwater manager, Horry County; Vice President **Taylor Brewer**, stormwater manager, Beaufort County; Secretary/Treasurer **Michaela Canady**, stormwater superintendent, City of North Augusta; Member at Large **Susan Lunt**, Carolina Clear Coordinator, Clemson Cooperative Extension; and Past President **Chris Wannamaker**, stormwater utility manager, Charleston County.

The Municipal Court Administration Association 101 program, which provides municipal court administrators, clerks of court, and other court staff with the skills critical to running and administering the duties of a municipal court, recognized several new graduates. They are **Christy Allen**, Town of Hampton; **Kimberlee Biernacki**, City of Folly Beach; **Doris Craven**, Town of Elgin; **Valorie Dilenno**, City of Clemson; **Doris Hamilton**, Town of Gray Court; and **Christine McKaba**, Town of Reidville.

Understanding Opportunity Zones

Opportunity Zones are a federal tool designed to drive private investment into communities that need it most. These are specifically designated census tracts, which are geographic regions defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, where investors can receive significant tax benefits for putting private dollars to projects that create jobs, housing and business growth.

For local leaders, Opportunity Zones offer a chance to channel market-driven funding into long-term, place-based development that fits local needs.

How Opportunity Zones became law

The Opportunity Zone program became law as part of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. The idea, though, originated through a bipartisan proposal championed by Sen. Tim Scott (R-South Carolina) and Sen. Cory Booker (D-New Jersey).

After the passage of the 2017 tax law, governors in every state were given the power to nominate certain low-income census tracts as Opportunity Zones. The U.S. Department of the Treasury reviewed and approved those nominations, ultimately designating more than 8,700 zones across the country. For local governments, that designation provided communities with a federally recognized framework to attract long-term investment.

How the program works

At its core, the Opportunity Zone program is built on a series of tax incentives. Investors who sell an asset — for example, stock or real estate — and reinvest those gains into a Qualified Opportunity Fund can receive three key benefits:

- Deferral – Investors can postpone paying capital gains taxes on their original investment for up to nine years.

- Reduction – If investors keep the investment for at least five years, the taxable portion of that original gain is reduced.

- Exclusion – If investors hold the new investment for 10 years or longer, any gains earned inside the Opportunity Zone are completely tax-free.

Recent changes to Opportunity Zone legislation

The passage of H.R.1, also known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, in 2025 brought substantive changes to the Opportunity Zone Program. Among the most significant shifts is that the program is now a permanent part of the tax code. The initial Opportunity Zones had previously been set to expire in 2026.

The law also established a new decennial designation system. Every 10 years, beginning in 2026, states may nominate new census tracts for Opportunity Zone status. Each qualifying tract, when certified by the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, will carry that status for a 10-year period.

Stronger incentives have also been placed on rural investment, offering enhanced tax benefits. In the standard Opportunity Zone program, after five years, investors receive a 10% reduction in the amount of gain they have to pay taxes on. In a Rural Opportunity Zone, that reduction becomes 30%, providing three times the normal tax break.

The substantial improvement requirement, which is 100% in Opportunity Zones, is now reduced to 50% in rural zones, making renovation, rehabilitation and adaptive reuse projects in rural areas more financially feasible.

Opportunity Zones in South Carolina

South Carolina has more than 135 designated Opportunity Zones, stretching from rural counties to urban neighborhoods. The website www.scopportunityzone.com gives the location of all of the zones in the state, along with further resources on how to take advantage of the program and details about successful projects.

Leaders across the state have leveraged Opportunity Zones to attract industrial development, expand workforce housing and revitalize downtown districts. While federal legislation created the initial framework, it's local leadership that determines whether these investments become catalysts for lasting, equitable growth.

Enter an Achievement Award Project by February 4

The last day to submit projects for the Municipal Association of SC 2026 Achievement Awards will be Wednesday, February 4.

The awards provide a way to showcase the hard-to-see projects that local governments undertake to make their operations run smoothly and enhance their communities. The awards recognize excellence in local government programs and help share ideas among municipal officials and staff.

Competition categories

The Municipal Association accepts award submissions each year in either a population category or one of five subject categories:

- Communications
- Economic Development
- Public Safety
- Public Service
- Public Works

Cities and towns with a population greater than 20,000 can compete only in of the five subject categories only. Those municipalities with a population of 20,000 or fewer — as counted in the 2020 census data — can compete in either a population or subject category.

Each city or town can only submit one entry and select one category. Multiple entries and categories are not allowed.

Eligibility

Projects need to be substantially complete to be eligible. Submitted projects that do not win may be submitted only one additional time.

Application and deadline

Applications are available at www.masc.sc (keyword: Achievement Awards). Award submissions must have a completed application along with supporting material and three photos, and a signature from the municipality's mayor.

Cities submitting in the subject categories must make an oral presentation at the Municipal Association's office in Columbia during an assigned time on February 23 or 24.

The Municipal Association will recognize award winners at its 2026 Annual Meeting in Greenville on July 18.

For more information, contact Meredith Houck at 803.933.1215 or mhouck@masc.sc.

Secretary of Transportation Powell to Talk Road Infrastructure at Hometown Legislative Action Day

The head of the South Carolina Department of Transportation will share his perspective on how the agency can work together with cities and towns on the development and maintenance of the state's infrastructure during Hometown Legislative Action Day. The Municipal Association's annual legislative conference will take place Tuesday, January 20, at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center.

Justin Powell was appointed as the state's 17th secretary of transportation in 2024. He previously served as chief operating officer of the SCDOT, and before that as chief of staff under former Secretary of Transportation Christy Hall. Powell has extensive experience in local government operations, having previously worked for both counties and cities.

The SC Department of Transportation has been involved in major road upgrades around the since the 2017 passage of the SC Infrastructure and Economic Development Reform Act, which phased in new revenues for roads through an increase in gasoline taxes and other fees. A SCDOT report from March 2025 counted 9,385 miles of the state's highway system repaved in the seven years afterward. It also reported work either taking place or already completed on 111 miles of the state's interstate highways.

The Association's Hometown Legislative Action Day draws local officials from all over the state to Columbia to receive updates on current legislative issues and visit their local legislators at the State House. Find the full agenda and details for Hometown Legislative Action Day at www.masc.sc (keyword: HLAD).

Financial Reports, Economic Interest Statements Due the First Part of Each Year

2026

In the first several months of the year, South Carolina municipalities have financial reports due to the state, and municipal officials must submit their Statement of Economic Interest. In some cases, city or town audits are due during this period, although this is determined by the timing of the beginning of the municipality's fiscal year.

Audits and compilation of financial statements

Depending on when a city's fiscal year begins, audit reporting may or may not be an item for the city to complete at the beginning of the year. SC Code Section 5-7-240 requires all municipalities to submit a financial audit to the Office of the State Treasurer within 13 months of the end of that municipality's fiscal year.

An audit must include all financial records and transactions of the municipality and any agency funded in whole by the municipality, plus a report of the recording, collection and distribution of applicable court fines.

For municipalities with a fiscal year ending December 31, the 13-month requirement means that the audit for FY 2024 is due by January 31, 2026. For a fiscal year ending June 30, the audit for FY 2024 will be due July 31, 2026.

Any municipality that misses its audit submission deadline may have all of its state payments — including 100% of Local Government Fund dollars, all of the Local Option Sales Tax revenue if the city is located in a LOST county and state accommodations tax funds — withheld by the State Treasurer's office until the audit is received. The State Treasurer posts a list of municipal delinquent audits at www.treasurer.sc.gov.

A change to state law in 2023 allows cities and towns with less than $500,000 in total recurring revenues the option of submitting a compilation of financial statements as an alternative to a full audit. Municipalities with a court system must submit this annually, and those without a court system must submit them once every three years. They should follow the same rule of submitting them within 13 months of the end of the fiscal year.

Local Government Finance Reports

Municipalities must submit their Local Government Finance Report to the SC Department of Revenue and Fiscal Affairs, due by March 15. The online report is available through www.rfa.sc.gov. Municipalities that do not submit this report on time face the penalty of losing 10% of the municipality's share of the Local Government Fund, under SC Code Section 6-1-50.

Statement of Economic Interest submissions

Public officials must use the SC State Ethics Commission's Statement of Economic Interest forms to report their income, as well as any economic interest in real, personal or business property, according to SC Code Section 8-13-1110.

The requirement applies to all public officials, including those whose public service is unpaid.

The State Ethics Commission maintains a full list of all types of public officials subject to the SEI requirement, as well as the circumstances under which they must make a disclosure, on its website, www.ethics.sc.gov. The forms are due by electronic filing by noon on March 30.

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 that can be 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 start increasing daily until they hit maximum amounts.

Important Reporting Dates

- **January 31** – Audits due for municipalities with fiscal years ending December 31
- **March 15** – Local Government Finance Report due
- **March 30 at noon** – Statements of Economic Interest due
- **July 31** – Audits due for municipalities with fiscal years ending June 30

Municipal Association Cooperative Purchasing Program Adds New Partner

City Connect Market, a program launched by the Municipal Association of SC in 2021 to help South Carolina's cities and towns take advantage of volume discounts on purchases, has added a new partner organization.

The program has now joined on with CarolinaBUY, which serves municipalities and other organizations nationwide and offers purchasing contracts in areas including cybersecurity; office supplies; athletic and playground facilities; heating, ventilation and air conditioning; vehicles; signage and other areas.

This partnership joins another City Connect Market partnership that has existed since the program's beginning with HGACBuy. That nationwide government procurement services assists with purchasing in a wide variety of products and services, primarily in the areas of public safety, public works, emergency services and communications.

How to participate

Officials and staff can learn more on the City Connect Market page at www.masc.sc (keyword: City Connect Market). The webpage has links to product listings under all of the contract categories. Users can search through the available products or services, or can contact the Municipal Association with a specific request.

After the municipality receives and approves a quote, the Association will work directly with HGACBuy or CarolinaBUY to place the order. The Association serves as a liaison that can assist the municipality throughout the purchasing process. Those cities and towns that wish to use this process should review their procurement ordinances to make sure that cooperative purchasing partnerships are an approved purchasing method.

For more information about the City Connect Market, contact Municipal Association Deputy Executive Director Jake Broom at 803.933.1270 or purchasing@masc.sc.

Association Highlight:
City Quick Connect Podcast

The *City Quick Connect* podcast of the Municipal Association of SC offers short discussions from Association staff and municipal officials covering many areas and issues that matter to city and town governments — legislation, municipal projects, risk management, economic development and training opportunities, among others.

During the legislative session at the beginning of each year, the podcast includes episodes that expand on the legislative action updates available through the *From the Dome to Your Home* email reports. These podcasts also feature insights from the Association's advocacy team about late-breaking activity at the General Assembly and opportunities for local leaders to engage in the process. Another podcast series, *SC/DC*, examines the Municipal Association's work with South Carolina's congressional delegation.

Find current and past episodes online at www.masc.sc (keyword: podcast) or through Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Amazon Music.

What Is a 'Reading" When Adopting an Ordinance?

South Carolina Code Section 5-7-270 provides that when city or town councils are adopting ordinances, "[n]o ordinance shall have the force of law until it shall have been read two times on two separate days with at least six days between each reading."

This requirement exists to ensure that councils consider their proposed ordinances during more than one public meeting, and that the public has adequate notice before the council gives final approval to an ordinance.

The statute, however, does not describe what actions are necessary to "read" a proposed ordinance.

What is a "reading?"

In legislative practice, both at the state and national level, a "reading" does not ordinarily mean that the entire document, or even the full title, is read aloud.

The National Conference of State Legislatures has explained that a reading "refers to a specific stage in the legislative process," and typically consists of an identification of the bill under consideration by number, title or sponsor. Legislative chambers treat readings as procedural markers that indicate progress in the enactment process, not as literal public readings aloud of the bill under consideration.

South Carolina municipalities follow this procedural marker as general practice. Councils often provide readings by ordinance number, title or subject matter, while making the text of the proposed ordinance itself available to councilmembers and the public in compliance with the SC Freedom of Information Act.

This approach satisfies the statute's intent in several ways:

- ordinances are considered on two separate occasions, spaced at least six days apart; and

- members of the public receive clear notice of the matter being considered before the council gives final approval.

Section 5-7-270 also authorizes each municipality to "by ordinance establish its own rules and procedures as to adoption of ordinances."

Because of this, councils may clarify, in their own rules of procedure, what form a "reading" will take.

Suggested practices

Councils should make sure that the meeting agenda posted under the SC Freedom of Information Act includes at least the ordinance title and, when available, the ordinance number.

The accompanying agenda packet or supporting materials should contain the text of the ordinance being considered, so that both councilmembers and the public have access to the substance of the proposal in advance. If the municipality does not distribute an agenda packet, it should ensure that the full text of the ordinance being considered is available at the meeting and, upon request, to members of the public.

During the meeting, the presiding official should then identify the ordinance under consideration by reference to the title or number listed on the agenda. This practice provides clarity, ensures compliance with FOIA and confirms that the statutory requirement of a "reading" is met in a transparent and consistent manner.

Municipalities wishing to adopt their own rules and procedures for adoption of ordinances may contact their Municipal Association of SC Field Services manager — Charlie Barrineau, Desirée Fragoso or Rob Wolfe — for assistance. Find the Field Services territories and all contact information at www.masc.sc (keyword: Field Services).

Reducing Organizational Risk Through Mentorship

by Naomi Reed, Director of Risk Management Services, Municipal Association of SC

At the recent Municipal Association of SC Risk Management Services Annual Meeting, one conversation stood out as a clear example of how mentorship can strengthen local government organizations, as Jennifer Leland, human resources director for the City of Goose Creek, shared how mentorship has shaped her growth in this role.

She credited her colleagues Rebecca Mejia-Ward, previously the human resources director for the City of Fountain Inn, and Wynette DeGroot, who works in HR in Goose Creek, for helping her build the knowledge and confidence needed to succeed in her role.

Leland's story echoed advice from Steven Simon, senior risk control manager with Safety National. After more than 25 years in the safety field, Simon said the most powerful way to improve worker safety is through coaching and mentoring.

"When you have an environment where you're coaching and mentoring employees and giving them feedback, helping them thrive and excel, you're going to have an all-star employee," Simon told Insurance Journal.

Listening to employees, he added, is key: "They're closest to the risk, and they should have the most to say about how the job gets done."

In local government, mentorship is more than professional development, it's a proactive way to reduce organizational risk. When employees have trusted guides, who can help them understand policies, procedures and safety requirements, they are less likely to make mistakes that lead to financial loss, workplace injuries or liability claims.

In Leland's case, she said Goose Creek City Administrator Natalie Ziegler encouraged her to seek mentorship, and Fountain Inn City Administrator Shawn Bell also supported the effort. Mejia-Ward expanded the idea by hosting a handbook training that invited HR professionals from across the state to share best practices and learn together. This type of collaboration helps employees apply policies correctly, stay compliant and feel more confident in their work.

From a workers' compensation standpoint, mentorship of HR professionals can also improve safety outcomes. Employees who feel supported are more likely to speak up about hazards and help create safer work environments. That communication loop between frontline staff, supervisors and mentors can prevent small problems from turning into injuries or costly claims.

In Simon's discussion of mentorship among risk management personnel, he noted that some of the safest organizations he had seen are not the largest or most technologically advanced, but rather the ones that listen to and invest in their people. Even smaller cities and towns can achieve strong safety results when they put employees first, provide the right tools and avoid shortcuts.

Mentorship can also reduce liability risks. Staff who understand procedures and have someone to turn to when questions arise will be more likely to make sound decisions. In local government, where regulations and accountability are constant factors, this guidance can make the difference between smooth operations and costly missteps.

Leland said her experience shows how valuable mentorship can be. Her peers and colleagues provided both practical advice and strategic perspective, she said, helping her navigate challenges and strengthen her department's compliance practices. She explained that having experienced mentors helps emerging professionals learn faster, build confidence and share responsibility for getting things right.

Investing in mentorship can help keep employees engaged, reduces turnover and builds a culture of safety and accountability.

As Simon put it, every organization has a choice: "It's either pay now or pay later."

By investing in mentorship today, cities and towns can reduce the frequency and severity of future injuries, claims and disruptions tomorrow. When leaders listen, coach and support their teams, they protect both their employees and the communities they serve.

Using Video to Spread the Word

A growing trend across the Palmetto State is the use of well-crafted and detailed video segments to further initiatives as part of municipalities' greater communications strategy.

Video is proving to be an effective tool to reach constituents in a unique way that provides high-quality imagery with newsroom quality storytelling. The cities of Greer and Florence, as well as the Town of Mount Pleasant, are among those municipalities leading this trend.

In the Upstate, the City of Greer produces a vast amount of video content, according to Director of Communications & Strategic Initiatives Michelle Willis. A former television news journalist in Greenville, Willis took over as the communications manager for Greer in 2025. She now leads a team of four, including a videographer drone pilot, a communications specialist and a communications and public information coordinator.

"I think that what all of us former journalists want to do in communications roles is tell stories and provide more transparency," she said. "We realize that we can form our own little miniature newsrooms basically within our departments and tell great stories about the people in our community and the good work that our city is doing to serve our community."

One such way to reach the community is through a video series initiated before Willis' time called "GreerView," hosted by Anna-Elyse Lewis. The videos, along with other video content such as council meetings and "Tall Tuesdays," another video series, live on the city's YouTube channel and are shared in various outlets and across social media platforms.

"'GreerView' is a weekly segment [that we put] out on Mondays, and it's kind of an amalgamation of what happened the week before and what's coming up this week," Willis said. "We have experimented with a lot of different ways of doing it and we are continuing to tweak it," she said.

In addition to the video content produced, Willis explained that she is seeing the need for more still photography.

"A really great photo of an actual human doing human things is very effective at stopping people from scrolling when they are in their beds, or eating lunch, so we are experimenting with all of it," she said.

Across the state in the City of Florence, a variety of video content appears on its official YouTube channel, which according to Marketing, Communications & Municipal Services Director Amanda Pope, is to "educate the public and promote city services."

This includes council meetings and other board meetings, as well as two video series, "Florence in Focus" and "In the Limelight." The "Florence in Focus" series which covers happenings around the city has gained traction within the community since its inception last year. With the arrival of Maggie Moya-Mendez, communications and public relations specialist for Florence, who now hosts the show, its popularity continues to grow.

"Maggie's been here two years now, and probably in that year prior, we were recognizing that a new trend in social media is video — people wanting snippets of information [and] quick information," said Pope. "We came up with a theme and she took it and ran with it and made 'Florence in Focus' come to life for us, and I think it has been well received in the community. It is a great way for us to share what is happening in the community with upcoming events, or even just educational-type [information]."

Moya-Mendez said she still uses graphics and still photography, but she has noticed greater engagement with video.

In September 2025, the groundbreaking of the Greer Sports and Events Center became one of the topics to be covered by the city-produced "GreerView." Photo: City of Greer.

"With social media, it is very easy for people to get into mindless scrolling, so a lot of times we see this with our graphics, but with video content, we are able to capture the eye a little bit more," she said. "For best practices, we keep [the videos] under three minutes; keep them fast paced — it can be as simple as grabbing your phone and colleague."

New city purchases to improve video quality have included microphones and a drone, which Moya-Mendez became licensed to fly last year.

"I'd say the drone has really enhanced our video by capturing people's attention of giving them a different viewpoint then what they are used to seeing on the day-to-day, whenever they are scrolling," she said.

In the Town of Mount Pleasant, the town-produced video series "Mount Pleasant Minute" bridges the gap between town hall and its residents,

"It is a short, digestible video series that highlights updates on upcoming projects, community initiatives, [and] presents town projects in a way that is approachable and conversational," Communications Manager Eric LaFontaine said.

LaFontaine, who started with the town in 2020, launched the series two years ago. He now manages a team of three, of which two positions were created when he took the helm. One of those additions is Multimedia Production Coordinator Noah Krueger.

"He is our film guru [and does] all things film and editing. He is incredible — we are really lucky to have him," LaFontaine said.

The department also features Social Media & Marketing Manager John Greenberg and Community Engagement Strategist Autumn Klein, now the host of "Mount Pleasant Minute," who previously worked in television news.

"[Autumn's] position was created as a way to tell the good stories about what we are doing at the town," LaFontaine said. "A lot of what we were doing previously was reactive, and we needed to start telling some proactive stories so that the community knows about all the great stuff that we are working on."

He highlighted that prioritizing authenticity is another best practice for video creation.

"We find that people respond best to more genuine staff voices and community faces than overly scripted messaging. We always look at our analytics and try to find other ways to improve … [We] try to refine our future videos by making small tweaks, like adding subtitles or refining our thumbnails – things that seem kind of small, but they tend to make a bigger impact and a difference in what we are seeing in engagement," he said.

Mount Pleasant Mayor Will Haynie and town staff prepare for shooting of the State of the Town Address video. Photo: Town of Mount Pleasant.

Posted across social media platforms, including YouTube, and used in a variety of ways, the video content generated by the Mount Pleasant Communications team is also distributed in both internal and external newsletters.

"We are seeing huge engagement. Previously, we have always had a large following, but we did not see a whole lot of engagement or likes or shares on our posts," LaFontaine said. "Now that we're using video more, we're seeing people commenting, engaging, sharing and talking about their experiences with the projects that we're talking about."

The trend for short, informational video can serve as a great enhancement to any strategic communications program for a municipality, whether it be to share previous news, to promote upcoming events, or to highlight city personnel and other community happenings.

Maggie Moya-Mendez, communications and public relations specialist for Florence, became licensed to fly a drone for the city's video production efforts. Photo: City of Florence.

Social Media Moderation Needs Balance, Consistent Enforcement

For many municipalities, social media has cemented itself as critical way to communicate with their constituents, but operating social media accounts comes with legal challenges, especially in its First Amendment considerations.

At the Municipal Association of SC Communications Workshop in October, Association General Counsel Eric Shytle reviewed many critical areas of social media operation with communications professionals from across the state — forum management, developing viewpoint-neutral rules for moderating content and records retention.

Understanding how a municipality is legally permitted to moderate social media comments means understanding what kind of forum it has established.

When governments explicitly open a place of communication to everyone to discuss any topic, it is for constitutional purposes considered a fully public forum.

Shytle gave examples of places such as public parks or courthouse steps, where "since time immemorial, humankind has gathered to express their grievances."

To reserve the right to moderate, he said, municipalities should intentionally establish a limited public forum — one open to certain groups or subject matter but still public in nature, where regulation must be viewpoint-neutral and reasonable. As a non-social-media example of a limited forum, he offered the comparison of a city council meeting with a public comment period.

"You're allowing them [the public] to speak, but you're saying, 'hey, here's the rules," he said. "Public comment opens at 6:30, maybe you have to sign up to speak, maybe you have to be a resident, or you may talk about only the matter that's in front of you. That's a classic example of the limited public forum — you're opening it up at a certain time, in a certain place, for certain purposes."

Placing a disclaimer on a social media page, he said, can help establish this, announcing that "the purpose of this site is to discuss matters of public interest in and to the municipality as identified and raised by the municipality for discussion. It encourages users to submit comments that are on topic, but askes that they address comments to the specific topics discussed only."

Cities and towns should establish and make available social media policies that are viewpoint-neutral, Shytle said. Removing any posts that criticize the government would be an example of not being viewpoint-neutral, although they can regulate tone, topic and civility. The rules could prohibit profanity, threats, spam, personal data or commercial solicitations, for example.

Cities should then train employees who moderate comments to enforce them objectively. He noted that simply hiding comments can be less intrusive than deleting them or blocking users, and that deleting content without archiving risks potential violations of public records laws.

Shytle noted that neither the SC Freedom of Information Act nor the Public Records Act were enacted before the advent of social media, but it is still clear that social media activity generates public records, even when content is deleted.

"My view is that you would fit [the content] in by analogy," he said. "You could say, let's look at the state's General Records Retention Schedules for municipalities. Is it general housekeeping files? Is it general correspondence? You delete it when not needed. Is it stuff about public events? The rule is five years. Is it policy-related? It's permanent. Hopefully we'll get more guidance on this."

For those who remove or hide content, Shytle said, it's critical to preserve screenshots and logs of what was removed with reason for the removal stated, and to train staff on the legal need for taking these steps so that they can provide consistent and well-informed enforcement.

Public Comment Periods Need Rules and Fairness

Many of South Carolina's cities provide time during city council meetings for those who wish to speak to the council to do so.

This can provide a valuable way for residents to share concerns with local government, but these public comment sessions can also create conflict that interferes with the council's ability to conduct the business of the city. The council meeting might face high emotions or disruptive behavior. Other factors, like handling different public speakers inconsistently, can also worsen tensions.

Councils can help with these issues by formally establishing rules for public comment. Here are key things to remember about public comment periods:

State law does not require public comment periods

A public comment session is a time that the council may provide to hear from the public, within the guidelines that it sets, on topics of concern. A public comment period is different from a mandatory public hearing.

South Carolina law requires public hearings in many different contexts, including for example:

- before the council adopts its annual budget — SC Code Section 6-1-80, and

- before adopting a new service or user fee — SC Code Section 6-1-330.

- before adopting or amending comprehensive plans or ordinances under the Comprehensive Planning Act – SC Code Sections 6-29-530, 6-29-760, and 6-29-1130.

These public hearings have specific requirements. For example, the budget public hearing must be advertised at least 15 days in advance, while the public hearing on a comprehensive plan must be advertised at least 30 days in advance.

Set the rules

Councils sometimes pass ordinances to establish their rules for public comment. Rules can focus on many points:

- **When in the meeting the public may speak** — often at the beginning or end of the meeting.

- **Whether speakers must sign up in advance of the meeting.**

- **How long a person may speak.** These rules often aim to keep council meetings from running to excessive lengths of time. A 2023 SC Attorney General's opinion addressed a case where public comment rules allowed only three minutes per speaker, and noted that "[t]his Office cannot definitively state when the amount of time permitted is so short a court would find it unreasonable."

- **Whether speakers may comment upon only matters on the agenda, or on any topic.** The 2023 attorney general opinion found that a "relevancy requirement" would be legal, which could require that speakers confine comments to matters that are within the scope of the municipality's business. In 2025, the City of Greenville amended its rules to allow for those who wish to speak about an item on the meeting agenda at the beginning of the meeting, and for those who wish to speak on non-agenda items to do so at the end.

Explain the process and the expectations for speakers

The council can communicate to speakers, on the agenda and verbally, that the rules exist to ensure that councilmembers have adequate time to discuss critical issues, and to preserve order in the meeting. It can be useful to note that the comment period is the only portion of the meeting when the council will receive comments from attendees during the meeting.

Councils that set time limits will often display a timer or use light signals so that the individual speakers know when they must conclude their remarks.

Be prepared to keep order in the meeting

Some councils have rules or ordinances authorizing the presiding officer to stop public comments that either the chair or a majority of council determine to be uncivil, contentious or disruptive. Although it is legal to remove a person who violates rules from a public meeting, councils should exercise caution when doing this, and be mindful to avoid infringing on First Amendment rights in the process.

Simpsonville
SIMPLY HOME.

1. **Speak only from the podium after being recognized.**

2. **State your name and address.**

3. **Limit comments to three minutes.**

Public Participation during Council Meetings

At the beginning of Simpsonville City Council meetings, the city shows a video explaining rules and expectations for public comment during the meetings. Photo: City of Simpsonville.

Communicating Strategically

Cities Use Different Social Media Platforms for Different Purposes

For cities and towns, social media content creation and curation is no longer a "nice to have." It is an essential part of a municipality's communications strategy, often requiring a dedicated staffer or multiple staffers to make sure content is timely, properly geared toward different social media channels and increases community awareness and engagement.

Success goes beyond likes and shares. It means keeping residents informed when it matters most, like a major weather event or other emergency. And it means building community, where people learn of events and everyone is welcome to exchange ideas and concerns.

That last piece is the X-factor for those working on municipal social media.

"It's rewarding to see our work make a difference — whether that's someone showing up to an event because they saw our post, or a resident thanking us for keeping them updated," said Jessica Battista, digital communication coordinator for the City of Hardeeville.

Battista curates content over a variety of platforms — Facebook, Instagram, Threads, YouTube, Vimeo, LinkedIn, the city TV station and the official website. She works with a videographer/photographer and the city public information officer, and her office is part of the city's information technology team.

"They're a big help — whether it's providing drone footage for major projects or assisting if we have streaming or technical issues during meetings or events," Battista said of her IT colleagues.

Other city departments submit "media requests" to the communications team for determining which items will be promoted on which city accounts and to help maintain a consistent voice across channels. They use website "News Flash" updates for major city announcements, and social media to highlights events, community achievements and employee spotlights.

"Our goal is to keep residents informed, connected and engaged through a mix of timely updates and community storytelling," Battista said.

Weekly team meetings keep everyone on the same page.

"We plan upcoming projects, discuss media requests and create a clear game plan for events — what our goals and messaging will be when we're on-site," Battista said.

The city also uses the Nixle alert system, managed jointly by the police and fire departments to issue emergency notifications or construction alerts.

"I think one thing people should know is how much teamwork and planning goes into everything we do," Battista said. "It's not just posting on social media — it's coordinating

across departments, making sure information is accurate and representing the City of Hardeeville in the best possible way."

The team also attends meetings of the city's Youth Council, which provides local high school students with local government experience and gives them a voice in city governance.

"It's one of the most rewarding parts of what we do because we can see the impact — both in how they grow as leaders, and how the community responds to their efforts," she said.

In the City of Beaufort, Public Information Officer Ashley Brandon oversees an equally robust multichannel system, though she manages much of it herself. Her rule of thumb is to think like a resident.

"How I run my social media is: If I'm a Beaufort resident, what would I need to know — and when?" said Brandon.

She maps out content a month in advance, aligning posts with what residents will soon see around town — whether that's roadwork, an event or a new development project.

"We try to keep it consistent, brand-wise and looks-wise, across all platforms, even though they're all different and we all use them differently," she said.

She described the way the city uses its various social media platforms:

- Nextdoor carries straightforward, no-frills information — "just the bones of what needs to be said," Brandon explained.
- Facebook is the city's conversational hub, mixing video and text to meet residents' different preferences.
- Instagram focuses on strong visuals.
- YouTube is reserved for transparency: "We want residents to be able to go there, find the latest council or planning meeting, and watch if they couldn't attend," she said. While some cities use YouTube for storytelling, Beaufort keeps its channel strictly civic-focused — a clean archive of meetings and decisions.

Some of the reels on the City of Beaufort's Facebook page highlight businesses and ribbon cuttings. Photo: City of Beaufort.

"I reuse content, but I reorganize the content for each social media channel," Brandon said.

Some of her most successful content, in terms of web traffic and audience engagement, are explanatory reels.

"Those videos get 'thank-you' comments," Brandon said. "You rarely get those on government posts."

Brandon frequently stars in the quick-hit videos telling residents where work is going on or key things for which they need to be on the lookout.

"I love Beaufort, so I think that translates in all the communications," she said. "Maybe that's why the videos do well — because I truly love Beaufort, and I want to see Beaufort succeed."

In the Town of Fort Mill, Communications and Marketing Manager Chris Sardelli manages five official channels: Facebook, Instagram, X — formerly Twitter — Nextdoor and YouTube.

Facebook serves as Fort Mill's "most active digital communication channel," Sardelli said — a hub for real-time news, event information and transparency.

Instagram focuses on "picturesque moments," he said, celebrating the community's character through visual storytelling.

X is primarily used for official news and emergency notifications, while Nextdoor provides neighborhood-specific updates, according to Sardelli.
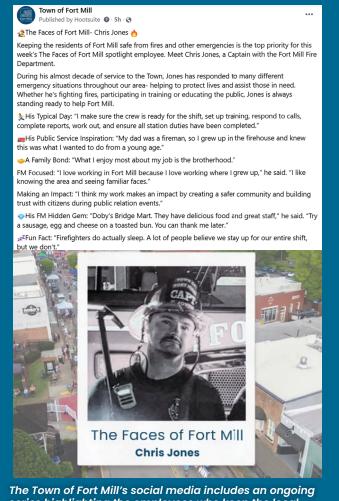
"We use [Nextdoor] for timely announcements and safety information, sent directly to residents in their neighborhoods," he said, noting that YouTube is useful for meeting videos and longer content, "offering residents an accessible way to stay informed."

A big part of the job is dealing with public comments and requests for information or help, Sardelli said.

"Each platform is monitored regularly to ensure that questions and concerns from residents are acknowledged and directed to the proper department for follow-up if needed," he said, adding that the town has a policy regarding social media comments. "While we encourage open discussion and value community feedback, moderation is applied as needed to maintain a constructive and safe online environment."

The Town of Fort Mill's social media includes an ongoing series highlighting the employees who keep the local government running. Photo: Town of Fort Mill.

Keeping communications civil and reliable also means keeping a tight rein on who has administrator access to the town's social media accounts.

Various Fort Mill town departments have their own Facebook pages, and a specific employee designated as the primary poster for those accounts. The town is the only entity that also has Instagram, X, Nextdoor and YouTube accounts, and only a handful of town employees have access to those accounts.

Sardelli creates the bulk of the content for the town's social media accounts, including the development of text and creation of graphics or photos, along with a videographer. He coordinates closely with town departments overseeing events, stormwater, parks and recreation and the police and fire departments. Together, they use coordinate their posts through the social media scheduling program Hootsuite.

Sardelli said a recent example of the importance of social media to the town's communications was a boil water advisory that required quick response and many updates.

"During emergencies or critical events, these channels allow the town to quickly share accurate, real-time information with residents, businesses and visitors," Sardelli said. "[These communications] minimize confusion, support coordinated response efforts and maintain public trust during a crisis."

The City of Hardeeville's communications encompasses everything from its website to a variety of social media channels, the city TV station and an alert system. Photo: City of Hardeeville.

Calendar

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

JANUARY

20 Hometown Legislative Action Day. Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. Topics include civility in local government, federal funding and working with the SC Department of Transportation. See page 5 for more information.

21 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government. Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. MEO Session A topics include the city as an employer, conducting public meetings, ethics, planning and zoning, as well as goal setting. MEO Sesssion B topics include business license tax administration, intergovernmental relations, municipality liability and municipal court. The Advanced MEO courses will be "Municipal Utility Policy and Administration" and "Public Safety Policy and Administration." Advanced Continuing Education topics include technology as well as municipal elected officials working with the news media.

FEBRUARY

4 Risk Management Services: SC Other Retirement Benefits Employer Trust Members Meeting. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

11 – 13 Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Institute, Year 1, Session B. Cambria Columbia Downtown the Vista.

17 – 18 Municipal Court Administration Association 101 Session C. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

18 Main Street SC First Quarter Managers' Training. SC Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

18 Palmetto Power Cities Legislative Breakfast. Blatt Building on the State House Grounds, Columbia.

24 Risk Management Services: Auto Loss Prevention Training. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

MARCH

2 – 4 SC Utility Billing Association Annual Meeting. Beach House, Hilton Head Island.

4 SC Business Licensing Officials Association Spring Training and Advanced Academy. Seawell's, Columbia.

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

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

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

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

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.