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UPTOWN

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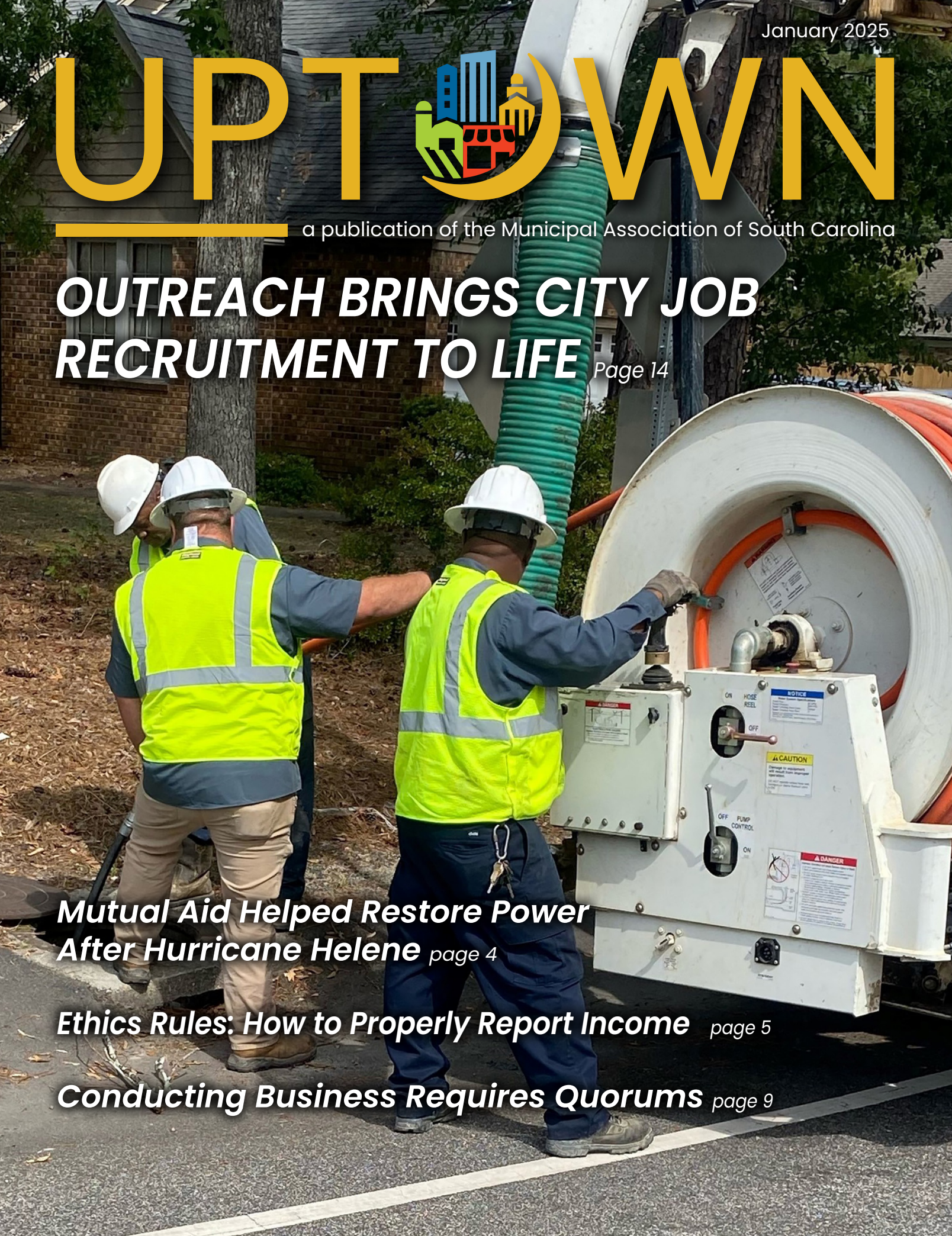
OUTREACH BRINGS CITY JOB RECRUITMENT TO LIFE Page 14



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Cover Photo: *City of Florence public utility crews clear storm drains. Florence uses outreach efforts such as ongoing hiring events to maintain its staffing requirements. Photo: City of Florence.*

More Liquor Liability Legislation Expected in 2025

The cost of liquor liability insurance in South Carolina has continued to rise, causing restaurants, bars and venues across the state to close or worry about whether they can remain open.

One reason is the SC Contribution Among Tortfeasors Act, under which multiple defendants can be held completely liable for a plaintiff's injuries. Additionally, the General Assembly passed, and Gov. Henry McMaster signed, the Dram Shop Bill in 2017, requiring establishments that serve beer, wine or liquor on premises after 5 p.m. to carry at least $1 million in liability insurance.

With that bill, the General Assembly responded to drunk driving accidents, including one involving an uninsured bar. Since the Dram Shop Bill's enactment, the state has seen fewer insurance companies willing to write liquor liability policies, and hospitality business owners are now experiencing significantly higher costs of insurance.

Several bills introduced last legislative session would have addressed liability and cost issues, but none passed. The House Judiciary Committee formed a Liquor Liability Ad Hoc Committee to hear from representatives of the hospitality industry. In January and February 2024, business leaders from across the state testified before the committee about their experiences.

Carl Sobocinski, president of Table 301 Restaurant Group in the Upstate, testified that his group's insurance rates had risen 86%, and that he felt fortunate that the increase was not higher. Sobocinski added that another Upstate bar's annual premium had jumped from $8,000 to $54,000 within two years. A co-owner of Transmission Arcade in Columbia testified their insurance rates started at $6,000 per year in 2020 and are now $65,000 annually, and that under the $65,000 policy, the insurance company will only pay $25,000 of any potential claim.

Following numerous meetings, former SC Representative and now SC Senator Jason Elliott sponsored H5066 to address the issue. The bill would have provided an affordable option for liquor liability insurance and allowed for reductions in the amount of liability coverage required if businesses complied with risk mitigation measures. It also would have reduced the coverage needed by nonprofits or special events to $500,000, and provided for a state trust fund to help reduce premiums. The bill passed at the committee level and overwhelmingly on the House floor by a vote of 102 – 2.

The SC Senate did not take up H5066, but instead focused on their own bills. The main Senate bill, S533, would have changed joint and several liability in the SC Contribution Among Tortfeasors Act and allowed the courts to consider percentages of fault among tortfeasors. S533 failed on the Senate floor.

Because this remains a critical issue for small businesses across South Carolina, the General Assembly created an Insurance Study Committee that met throughout the fall. SC Senate Majority Leader Shane Massey told *The State* newspaper that legislation on joint and several liability should be expected this year. The Municipal Association of South Carolina supports the hospitality industry's efforts to resolve this burden on small businesses.

Liquor liability insurance will be one of the legislative issues discussed during the Municipal Association's Hometown Legislative Action Day on January 21. Find the full agenda and details at www.masc.sc (keyword: HLAD).

February 5
Is the Last Day for Achievement Award Entries

The deadline for the Municipal Association of SC 2025 Achievement Awards is Wednesday, February 5.

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.

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 or public works. 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. Municipalities with a population greater than 20,000 can compete only in one of the five subject categories. Each city or town can only submit one entry and select one category. Multiple entries and categories are not allowed.

Projects need to be substantially complete to be eligible and can be submitted only one additional time if they do not win.

Applications

Applications are available at www.masc.sc (keyword: Achievement Awards). Cities submitting in the subject categories must make an oral presentation at an assigned time on February 24 or 25. The Municipal Association will recognize award winners at the 2025 Annual Meeting on Hilton Head Island in July.

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

NEWS BRIEFS

Three new local officials graduated from the Municipal Court Administration Association of SC 101 program in October. They are Jennifer Gilbert, Town of Pacolet; Taylor Roberts, Town of Hemingway; and Barbara Ann Williams, City of Denmark.

The SC Association of Stormwater Managers elected its 2025 board of directors. They are President Chris Wannamaker, Charleston County; Vice President Brandon Wagner, Horry County; Secretary/Treasurer Taylor Brewer, Beaufort County; Member at Large Stephen Thun, Kimberly-Horn and Associates, Inc.; and Past President Angela Crockett, Lancaster County.

Cinnamon Reid, revenue auditor for Richland County, received the Master of Business Licensing designation.

Association Highlight:
Municipal Officials and Legislative Directory

The Municipal Association of SC maintains a municipal directory that can help anyone seeking to contact any one of the 271 city and town governments around the state.

Beyond basic contact information, the directory lists the specific form of government for each city and town, the regular schedule of council meetings and the names of all elected officials and certain staff positions.

The online directory allows users to search for municipalities based on characteristics like the county in which the municipality is located, its population, or which state representatives and state senators serve it.

The Municipal Association's website also offers a Legislator Online Directory, which allows users to see which municipalities that state representatives and senators represent, as well as all representatives and senators who serve any portion of a particular municipality.

Find the online directory at www.masc.sc (keyword: municipal directory).

Mutual Aid Helped Restore Power After Hurricane Helene

With fallen trees taking out power lines across a broad path, Hurricane Helene's passage through South Carolina on September 26, 2024, caused unusually widespread power outages. Among the municipalities with electric utilities, line workers were joined by mutual aid assistance from across the state, thanks to the SC Association of Municipal Power Systems to get the power back on.

Helene's destruction came far inland even though the storm had declined from its peak as a Category 4 hurricane to a tropical storm as it moved from the Gulf of Mexico to South Carolina and beyond. The strongest peak wind gusts in the state — greater than 100 miles per hour — were recorded in McCormick and Edgefield counties, according to the National Weather Service, with 21 tornadoes confirmed.

Peak rainfall from the tropical cyclone was also the third highest in the state's history: 21.66 inches, recorded in the Rocky Bottom community of Pickens County. The two higher amounts have occurred close to the coast in recent years: 23.68 inches in Loris during Hurricane Florence in 2018, and 22.02 inches in Moncks Corner during Hurricane Debby in August 2024.

These conditions wreaked havoc on the state's electrical grid. South Carolina recorded 1.36 million electrical customers without power on September 27. Among SCAMPS members, there were around 103,000 customers without power.

Of the 21 cities with electric utilities, 14 requested mutual aid. A total of 62 utilities from 12 states provided mutual aid, from places as far away as Michigan, Missouri and Massachusetts. A total of 343 personnel contributed to the recovery effort.

Abbeville Public Utilities staff, for example, faced 115 hours of work from linemen and staff to restore power to customers, said Tim Hall, Director of Public Utilities. He noted that mutual aid served as a critical resource for the state's electric cities "in times of need."

"The coordination provided by the SCAMPS mutual aid program and help from Santee Cooper provided an additional 50 lineman and needed resources to Abbeville that greatly expedited the effort. In short, a miracle was accomplished within the course of a week," he said.

Greenwood Commissioners of Public Works General Manager Jeff Meredith also expressed gratitude for the coordination and resources made possible through SCAMPS.

Greenwood CPW workers were joined by seven utilities from six states, working "almost non-stop to restore power to our customers," he said.

"Without the dedication of our workforce, we would not have been able to restore power to the majority of our customers within a week to 10 days," Meredith said. "All customers that could be connected were connected within 16 days. The contribution from mutual aid cannot be understated. Without the additional line workers, the restoration process would have taken much longer to accomplish. As always, we are grateful for Jimmy Bagley and Mike Jolly for ensuring that we had all the help we needed at such a critical time."

Jimmy Bagley, Rock Hill's deputy city manager, and Mike Jolly, Rock Hill's director of electric utilities, oversee the SCAMPS mutual aid program and coordinate out-of-state assistance.

South Carolina's electric cities restored power to 60% of all customers within three days of the storm, and to 97% of customers within two weeks, according to data gathered by SCAMPS.

The SC Association of Municipal Power Systems was initially established to provide mutual aid among power utilities during disasters, and it also provides legislative advocacy and training. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: SCAMPS).

Crews from Rock Hill assisted the City of Union with power restoration after Hurricane Helene. Photos: City of Rock Hill.

Ethics Rules

How to Properly Report Income

The public has a right to know if the public officials representing them receive any personal benefit because of their position with a governmental entity. For this reason, South Carolina law requires officials to report any economic interest they have in real, personal or business property when they file their mandatory Statement of Economic Interests with the State Ethics Commission.

By reporting economic interest in real, personal and business property, officials allow the public to gauge the level of private benefit, if any, they receive from public improvements or property sale. It also identifies significant interests they have in private businesses and governmental contracts.

Proper reporting on the SEI requires understanding what must be reported. When in doubt about the need to disclose an item, the safest course of action is to make the disclosure.

What constitutes an economic interest?

For the purposes of the SEI, "economic interest" is defined in SC Code Section 8-13-100 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" of at least $50.

Real estate rules

Public officials must disclose any real estate interest that either they have — or their immediate family has — in either of two cases:

- the real estate interest can be reasonably expected to be a conflict of interest with their municipal position; and
- if there has been $200 or more of public improvements made on the property or adjoining properties.

A public improvement is an expenditure of funds by a public entity — state, county, municipality, school district, special purpose district or public service district — that changes or adds to the property. Examples include roads, sidewalks, streetscaping, lighting, water, sewers or stormwater drainage systems.

Public officials must also report any real or personal property that they or an immediate family member has sold, leased or rented to the state or any other public agency. This includes listing the property's physical address, compensation received and the public agency involved in the transaction.

Business relationship rules

Public officials must also report the name and relationship of every business or entity in which they or an immediate family member have an interest, so long as it meets either of two criteria:

- they have a 5% or greater interest in the value of the business or entity, or
- if the value of the interest exceeds $100,000.

An additional rule exists for entities that do business with the municipality. Officials must disclose their relationships with and compensation received from any business

- where the public officials work,
- have an ownership interest or investment in, or
- have any other association.

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

Affiliate Associations Offer Huge Variety of Professional Development Possibilities

Education and professional development, both for elected officials and municipal staff, are key functions of the Municipal Association of South Carolina. The Association provides many affiliate groups dedicated to specific municipal job areas to help local officials serve their communities to the best of their ability.

These affiliate groups connect those in particular fields of work to their peers so they can network, learn through specially developed training and share their best practices and experiences. Membership in the affiliate associations includes online listserves that make sharing information and best practices around the state easier and faster.

Each affiliate is led by a board of directors elected by its membership. The Municipal Association provides management support to the boards.

Find all the affiliates' membership applications for 2025 on the respective pages of the affiliates, linked below. The nominal membership costs provide each participant with discounted training registrations and access to that group's closed listserve.

Here are the affiliate organizations available through the Municipal Association:

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.

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

Municipal Technology Association of SC

MTASC exposes 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

SC Association of Municipal Power Systems

Originally, the South Carolina Association of Municipal Power Systems existed solely for the state's electric cities to help one another during disasters. Although mutual aid is still the backbone of SCAMPS, it has expanded its scope to include legislative initiatives, public relations programs and training for electrical personnel. SCAMPS has organization-based membership rather than individual memberships.

Staff contact: Elizabeth Copeland, Staff Associate for Affiliate Services

The 2024 Annual Meeting of the SC Community Development Association included tours of several City of Rock Hill projects, including its BMX Supercross Track, Velodrome and the Rock Hill Sports and Event Center.

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: Eric Shytle, General Counsel

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 promotes sound human resources administration and encourages innovative programs. The national Human Resources Certification Institute and the Society for Human Resources Management recognize this training for continuing education credits.

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, Manager of Member Services

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

The most recent SC Municipal Human Resources Association Spring Meeting covered such topics as workplace safety culture, artificial intelligence and alternative staffing solutions.

Portable Generators Bring Hazards

Storm events ranging from ice storms to hurricanes can knock out electric power, leading people to turn to portable generators to keep the lights on. These generators come with safety hazards as well as emergency power. City workers need to be mindful of these issues, and fire departments may even include them in their fire prevention outreach efforts.

Carbon monoxide is an especially challenging hazard. As a colorless and odorless gas, it can accumulate to fatal levels without being detected. Roughly 100 people in the U.S. die each year from carbon monoxide poisoning associated with portable generators, according to estimates from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

For those employing generators during a loss of power, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has several recommendations for managing hazards, beyond the importance of operating the generator in accordance with manufacturer instructions.

Carbon monoxide

To keep carbon monoxide from accumulating dangerously, do not use generators indoors or in partially enclosed spaces, such as garages, even when these locations have some ventilation. Similarly, keep generators away from windows, doors and vents.

For indoor locations where carbon monoxide could build up, use battery-powered carbon monoxide detectors.

Electric shocks

Do not plug generators into a structure's power supply unless a qualified electrician has installed a transfer switch. Otherwise, the generator could energize electric wiring in the area and pose an electrocution danger to utility workers. Operators should plug appliances into the generator directly, or by using heavy-duty, outdoor-rated and grounded extension cords, which are rated for the devices' wattage or amperage.

Operators also need to keep generators in dry conditions and touched only with dry hands, and should be protected with a canopy if needed.

Fire

The generator's fuel supply, vapors from the fuel as well, and heat it generates can all be fire hazards. Gasoline and other fuels need to be stored and transported in approved, marked containers. Operators need to keep these containers away from sources of flame as well as heat-generating devices, including the generator itself.

Spilling gasoline on a hot generator can start a fire. Before refueling the generator, operators need to shut it down and allow it to cool. Generators can remain hot for a long time after use.

New Councils Need a New Mayor Pro Tempore

When a new council is elected and sworn in, it is time to elect a new mayor pro tempore.

Immediately after any general, or regularly scheduled, municipal election, SC Code Section 5-7-190 requires that a city or town council elect from its membership a mayor pro tempore. The councilmember who holds this title cannot hold it for any more than two years.

In instances where the mayor is absent or disabled, the mayor pro tempore acts as mayor in a temporary capacity. This service ends when the mayor returns, or upon the election of a new mayor in a case where the mayor's office is vacant.

When an extended vacancy occurs, the mayor's office is considered to remain vacant until it is filled by an election — the mayor pro tempore does not assume the office of the mayor permanently. However, the SC Office of the Attorney General found, in a 2009 opinion, that during the vacancy, the mayor pro tempore may be entitled to receive the mayor's salary, if any.

Councils that operate under a committee system often use the same cycle to elect or appoint councilmembers to standing committees. Such procedures are generally specified in the municipality's local rules of procedure.

The Municipal Association of SC hosts a virtual orientation session for newly elected officials titled, "You've Been Elected, Now What?" The next session will take place Wednesday, January 8. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: Newly Elected Officials Orientation).

Conducting Business Requires Quorums

A quorum is the minimum number of members of a public body who must be present for the body to take official actions. Quorum requirements apply to any governing body of a public entity, such as a city or town council. Council committees must also assemble quorums to act as the committee.

Except in unusual cases, a majority of the entire body must assemble to constitute a quorum. In a seven-person body, for example, at least four members must be present to make a quorum.

Public bodies with an even number of members

Most public bodies have an odd number of members. For an even number, the requirement of a majority means that bodies cannot establish a quorum with only half of the members in attendance. For an eight-person body, then, at least five members must be present to make a quorum.

Vacancies

Vacancies generally do not affect the quorum requirement. For example, a seven-member body with two vacancies will still require the presence of four members to constitute a quorum. The only situations in which a vacancy has been determined to alter the quorum requirement are actual, persistent vacancies in which there is no foreseeable time at which the vacancy will be filled. This is not an issue for councils, because state law requires elections to fill vacant council seats. It can happen on boards or commissions, for example, in the event of a member's death.

Under South Carolina law, a member of a public body generally continues in office until a successor is selected and qualified. Because of this, many perceived vacancies are not actual vacancies. The South Carolina Attorney General's office has repeatedly noted that a resignation does not automatically create a vacancy. Instead, the resigning member remains nominally "in office" until a successor is qualified.

Abstentions, conflicts and recusals

A member who is physically present but who abstains or fails to vote counts in establishing a quorum. For example, if four members of a seven-member body are physically present, but one abstains, the four-member quorum requirement is still satisfied.

A member who has a conflict of interest but still votes does not count in establishing a quorum. If four members of a seven-member body are physically present, and one has a conflict of interest but still votes, the four-member quorum requirement is not satisfied. This rule was reaffirmed recently in *Anderson County v. Preston* where the court determined that four members of a seven-member body had a conflict of interest in a specific matter, and that the body therefore lacked a quorum to act on that matter.

The South Carolina Ethics Commission has long advised that members who recuse themselves because of a conflict of interest should physically leave the room. Members who do this do not count towards establishing a quorum. For example, if four members of a seven-member body are present, and one declares a conflict of interest under the ethics rules and physically leaves the room, the four-member quorum requirement is not satisfied.

The South Carolina Court of Appeals explained in 2017 in the case *Anderson County v. Preston* that "[u]nlike in the case of a recusal – in which a member physically leaves the room to avoid participation – when a member properly abstains, it does not have the effect of defeating a quorum because the member is still physically present."

In uncommon case in which it is impossible to get a quorum without counting the conflicted members, the members should properly recuse themselves under the State Ethics Act. They should remain physically present for the vote, and state clearly on the record that their only reason for doing so is the preserve the quorum.

For more information, see the Handbook for Municipal Officials in South Carolina *at www.masc.sc (keyword: Handbook for Municipal Officials).*

Public Information Staff Coordinate Diverse Content, Audiences and Responsibilities

As communications methods and platforms have exploded in recent years, so have the job responsibilities of public information pros in city government.

There's content to create — from podcasts to blogs to social media posts that will play across various channels. There's media relations advice to offer to city departments — from parks and recreation to economic development. And there are events to plan — from news conferences to downtown festivals.

And on any given day, breaking news can disrupt the to-do list and send a PIO scrambling to find out the facts and get the accurate information out to the public.

Myrtle Beach Director of Communications and Creative Services Meredith Denari. Photo: City of Myrtle Beach.

In Myrtle Beach, Meredith Denari, the city's director of communications and creative services, has a background as a TV news anchor and reporter. Her main responsibility is serving as the city's spokesperson, which includes crafting messages to the public and media, answering questions, coordinating interviews and doing weekly radio segments. Her staff attends and broadcasts council meetings and presentations, and plans the city's formal ceremonies for Memorial Day, September 11, Veterans Day, the Christmas tree lighting and ribbon cuttings and dedications.

But a growing part of the job is creating content. And while she said the best part of her job is the people she works with each day, her favorite part of the position is the journalism aspect.

"Accurate journalism is very important in every community, and I get to play a role in that by telling Myrtle Beach stories first with an insider's look," she said. "With 83,000 followers on Facebook, we have a great platform, in addition to our newly created YouTube channel, MyrtleBeachCityGov, and your usual social media platforms," she said.

Denari was hired as the city's assistant public information director in 2021 and took over the top job this year when long-serving public information director Mark Kruea retired. She said the support for storytelling from the city's senior staff and council has allowed her to purchase quality videography equipment and create a new position of creative services manager.

"We have a team of multi-skilled specialists who are taking their talents to the next level and giving our content a more news-like twist, keeping the 'Why do I care?' mindset as they write in a focused, clear and 'get-to-the-point' way for our followers to easily understand what's happening and why it's important. All videos have a target to be a minute or less in length. Unless it's a special video, 2 minutes is too long. "

She said her office's goal is for residents, visitors and followers to visit the city's Facebook page first for their news, and for reporters to see the city's content and replicate it onto their platforms.

"The easier we can make the reporter's job by laying out the story for them and communicating the good stories coming from the City of Myrtle Beach, the better," she said.

As the public and community affairs director in Darlington, Hunter Thomas' position is a mix of responsibilities.

In his marketing and public relations role, he creates content using video, photography and print collateral, along with writing news releases and speaking to the media on television. His job also has a community affairs aspect where he helps guide the beautification board in town, provides support for community organizations, and hosts events.

Darlington Public and Community Affairs Director Hunter Thomas. Photo: City of Darlington.

He started the job in April, but he's not new to the profession or to Darlington, where he grew up.

"I went to college in Florence, graduate school in Hartsville. I've stayed in the Pee Dee region my entire life. To be able to come and serve my city and to see things come to fruition means a lot to me," Thomas said.

One of Thomas' past jobs in public relations was with an industry closely tied to Darlington – NASCAR and Darlington Motor Speedway. For the past 10 years he has been a licensed NASCAR journalist, and still continues that work on his motorsports news and opinion website, thefourthturn.com. That background helped both his skillset and his network as he settled into his job with the city.

"If you can take a picture of a 200 mile-an-hour racecar, you can take a picture of an event in town," he said.

He already had many industry connections for the first event he hosted in his new role – the NASCAR Haulerfest, which brings to downtown Darlington the 18-wheelers that transport racecars.

His community background has helped him understand the communication methods residents are comfortable using.

"We have residents who are very technologically advanced and use their phones for everything and residents who don't use a phone at all. I learned to cater to both demographics," he said.

"It's important to have some form of printed material that you mail to residents. It could be simple, an event calendar or one or two news items, but something that lets residents know what's going on it the city."

He said it's also important to build a digital contact list to expand the reach of his digital newsletter. While not everyone uses the same social media platforms, he said Facebook remains a strong outlet.

"You learn quickly that people don't know what's going on if you're not speaking in their space," he said.

In Chapin, Dylan Francis has been the town's communications specialist for about a year and a half, moving to the position from his previous job with the *Newberry Observer.*

His main responsibilities are community events and public relations. He plans and coordinates the town's events, updates the town's website, writes a monthly newsletter, posts on social media and writes press releases.

Chapin's largest event on the calendar is the Labor Day Festival, which lasts several days and includes a country music concert, a 5K race, more than 100 vendors and the Labor Day Parade, which has been going on since the early 1970s.

"I do enjoy being able to help form further community," he said. "Chapin can be a place where people go to retire, or sometimes want to keep to themselves. So providing a forum for people to come together, see their neighbors, listen to music, and bridging those gaps is something I do enjoy doing."

Francis said combatting misinformation is one of the biggest challenges he has found in his job.

"Even if you put out an official statement, a lot of misinformation still gets passed around," he said. "It can get challenging when a rumor takes flight and catches fire. You get a barrage of calls, people asking if it's true."

He said the town has strong local media partners, including Best Version Media, which publishes *Chapin Neighbors*, which also hosts the *Chamber Neighbors* podcast addressing local business and nonprofit highlights. Francis said he is fortunate that they invite him on to promote local happenings such as the Labor Day Festival.

"Social media tends to be effective in its range, but it can also cause some discourse," he said, adding that the Chapin website is updated often with breaking news that residents need to know — such as a boil water advisory or a road closing.

As for advice for his fellow municipal PR practitioners: "I would urge people to approach a situation from the eye of the public. People have a lot of notions about local governments in all different levels. Generally, people don't come knocking at your town hall happy. A certain amount of empathy is key to proper public communications. Think about how you'd want to be treated yourself in the same situation if the roles were reversed."

Chapin Communications Specialist Dylan Francis. Photo: Town of Chapin.

Sharing the Development Story

The "ForGreer" intiative involves four major municipal projects planned over four years. Photo: City of Greer.

Residents take a keen interest in topics like city construction projects, planning and development, or new business recruitment. Several municipal communications officials joined a panel during the Municipal Association of SC Communications Workshop in November to discuss how they engage with audiences on these hot topics.

In the City of Greer, one recent high-visibility project is what the city named "CenterG," a massive effort to replace downtown utility lines while simultaneously upgrading the entire downtown streetscape. Another project established by the city's economic development team, the Platform at Greer, is a start-up space serving local entrepreneurs by connecting them to the business community and training, and providing market validation to determine product viability.

Yet another major effort, branded as the "ForGreer" initiative, involves four major municipal projects over four years, costing about $92 million and aimed at addressing Greer's growth — a public safety training facility, a new downtown parking deck, new fire station, and a sports and events center including basketball, volleyball, e-sports and batting cages.

The city knew the effort would bring plenty of questions from the public, said Greer Community and Media Outreach Coordinator Ayla Fitzpatrick. They built a website full of information and featuring question submission form.

"We thought we were being incredibly transparent with the information that we were putting out there, but the public felt like it wasn't enough," she said. "We said, 'whatever information about these projects that can be public, let's make it public without them having to ask. Let's put it all in one place, whether that's city council meetings, agendas, site plans, renderings, let's make it easy for them to access.'"

A challenge Greer faces, Fitzpatrick said, comes from its location among other Upstate cities and towns with a huge amount of growth and development success stories, making it harder for them to break through to the audience.

Wherever possible, she said, "we determined that we needed to tell our own story."

The City of Greenville is also telling its own stories, where its *Week In Review* reports taking the form of a newsletter and news video packages produced by staff, creating the kind of visuals information breakdowns that help audiences understand complicated governmental topics. Greenville Multimedia Manager Loren Thomas, who often delivers reports in those videos, is one member of the city's Communications & Engagement Department.

Thomas described the development efforts the department touches, including the neighborhood master plans created with extensive community engagement to address residents' needs. In fact, the recent Haynie-Sirrine Neighborhood Master Plan was guided by a steering committee of neighborhood leaders, businesses and property owners, rather than by consultants.

Another project was the city's development code update, involving everything from downtown and neighborhood development to affordable housing and open space preservation.

Communications efforts, Thomas said, "focused on explaining the 'why' behind the code, with interviews with steering committee members to highlight the importance of the update."

In the City of Forest Acres, development communication may involve publicizing the dozens of new businesses to open recently, but it has also involved a pressing issue for the city — the numerous enclaves, or "doughnut holes," to exist throughout the city, creating confusion and inefficiency when delivering governmental services.

To address this, Director of Communications Lynnsey Baker said she used "my news reporter hat" to break down the issue into key themes to present to the audience of property owners who might annex — what municipal boundaries mean and where they are, annexation processes and the value of services.

The "Annex the Acres" campaign covered this through a website, public meetings, targeted news media pushes and postcard mailings.

"In the end, our big success is we've annexed 20 properties so far," she said. "We have more waiting, they're just not contiguous yet."

Don't Just Delete Comments You Don't Like — and Other Social Media Best Practices

Many who work in local government have experienced the huge potential for engagement that social media creates as well as the challenges it can generate — anger, divisiveness or misinformation.

Here are key points to consider for managing social media while complying with the law.

Establishing policies helps with moderating comments

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution limits a municipality's ability to do things like delete a post or ban a user.

An important question for governmental social media is whether the government has created an open public forum or limited public forum. In an open public forum, which a municipality might establish by inviting or allowing open comment on any topic, the government may impose very few regulations.

Municipalities should avoid establishing open public forums on social media. If they allow comments, they should provide rules that establish limited public forums, where expression is available only for a specific purpose or topic. Courts have found, however, that deleting comments that criticize the municipality or its employees violates the First Amendment, even in a limited public forum.

Officials should consult with an attorney when drafting rules. The model social media policy from the International Municipal Lawyers Association suggests this language on social media platforms to clarify that the forum is limited:

"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. We encourage you to submit comments that are on topic, but please address your comments to the specific topic(s) discussed. This is a forum limited to the specific topics identified and raised by the municipality."

Having established a limited public forum, the municipality may impose viewpoint-neutral terms and conditions for comment, which may prohibit — for example — profanity, threats or racist comments.

Elected officials should be careful with personal accounts

Public officials should beware the kinds of posts, like bullying or incendiary comments, that can damage the municipality's credibility or officials' ability to work with one another. They should also consider whether their personal social media accounts have become a public forum.

In the 2019 case *Davison v. Randall,* the federal Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals found that a county councilmember used her personal Facebook page in a way that created an open public forum. The page listed her official county phone number, email and web address. Most of her posts related to her work as a councilmember. One post invited any resident to express feelings on any topic. Because the page was a public forum, the First Amendment applied to it, and the court concluded that the councilmember violated the First Amendment when she deleted comments based on their viewpoint.

In the 2020 case *Campbell v. Reisch,* the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals noted that public officials who use their social media accounts for official duties cannot block social media users based on viewpoint. However, the court ruled that a Missouri state representative whose account was "used overwhelmingly for campaign purposes" did not violate the First Amendment when blocking someone on social media.

Social media archiving

The SC Freedom of Information Act may create a complication when someone submits a FOIA request for social media records and the municipality cannot locate the records. The social media platform itself may not have records, especially from deleted posts, and this is where paid social media archiving platforms can come in. Local governments need to understand the potential for these FOIA requests and the costs of archiving solutions. At the very least, they should make a record of any user posts they remove for violating city policies.

Outreach Brings City Job Recruitment to Life

With unemployment rates low and workers in a stronger position to choose where they want to work, cities and towns have faced the daunting task of keeping their employee rosters full. It can be especially tough in a smaller town where finding the right fit for a position is vital — or in larger cities where there can be more than 100 jobs to fill at any given time.

To recruit workers, cities have used job fairs, citywide hiring events and social media to tout the benefits of employees working for their hometowns.

For the City of Woodruff, finding the right fit for their team of 45 employees is more important than having to live with an open position, said City Manager Lee Bailey.

"For us, it's about our culture," Bailey said. "You have to be willing to look a little harder to find the right person."

Bailey has worked for the city for 24 years, the past 10 as city manager. His resume is an example of something the city often looks for — a person who joins the city as a career, and then moves into a leadership position.

"You will not always find a successful candidate immediately. Sometimes you have to be patient. I will sit on a spot for six months if I have to," he said.

Bailey said the first step to attracting the right employees is getting them interested in what the city is doing. Woodruff uses its social media channels to share messages about the city's efforts and activities.

"What you put out on social media, helps create a buzz and interest in what the city is doing," he said. "Whether you like it or not, social media is a powerful tool. It gets the word out a lot faster than traditional advertising."

Bailey said he also relies on current employees — especially police officers — to help recruit new workers.

"If you have a group of workers who are happy with where they are, that is the best recruitment tool," he said.

The City of Florence began using hiring events in 2021 after the recreation department director asked for help recruiting workers for his department. The event was held in the city council chambers, and drew an unexpected 70 interested applicants.

"I didn't know if we were going to have anybody come," said Jennifer Krawiec, human resources director for the city. "Then all these people showed up."

The city then decided to host an event for all departments, located at the city's Pearl Moore Basketball Center. The events, which took place quarterly in 2022 and which now take place twice a year, routinely draw more than 200 people.

"We have representatives from each department who are able to do interviews on the spot," Krawiec said. "And for some positions, we can offer jobs that day."

The city is averaging about 10 hires from each event, according to Krawiec, and the workers acquired from the job fairs have filled positions from sanitation

Woodruff uses social media to advertise its job openings. Photo: City of Woodruff.

Career fairs help the City of Columbia fill its jobs. Photo: City of Columbia.

workers and heavy equipment operators to accountants and planners.

"For the number and the varied type of employees we're getting, these hiring events have been the most successful thing we've done in recruiting new employees," Krawiec said.

For hiring police officers, however, the city has had to take a different approach, because the number of officers was so depleted after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

"We were down 20 to 25 officers at one point," Krawiec said of the force that typically has about 100 sworn officers. "We were calling other agencies to find out what they were doing. It was a difficult time in 2021."

The city went to work figuring out how to modernize hiring practices for police. To recruit more officers, the city revised policies to allow facial hair and tattoos, and is offering $1,500 signing bonuses to new recruits. A new program allows high school graduates who are not yet old enough to be officers to work as cadets for the department until they turn 21.

Some of those ideas came from exit interviews with officers leaving the force and from groups of current officers.

"We're always looking for good ideas and we're always trying to be innovative," Krawiec said. "Some of our best ideas we get are from our employees."

For the City of Columbia, keeping up with openings even in the best of times can be difficult.

With more than 2,200 employees — about 850 of whom are firefighters and police officers — the city has about 10% of its positions open at any given time, said Tiniece Javis, human resources director. About 50 employees are hired each month to replace those who leave for one reason or another.

To help recruit new workers, the city has held career fairs looking for candidates for all available jobs citywide. In the event's third year, about 1,200 people registered and about 700 showed up.

City departments had tables at the event where they could introduce attendees to what they do and take resumes.

"We actually conduct interviews at the career fair," Javis said.

To increase interest in the career fairs, the city teamed up with a local television station to create and promote paid segments called "Talent in the City" that spotlighted different departments and what the workers there do.

"People don't have a really good idea of what happens in the city, the work that has to be done," said Javis, who worked for 28 years in public schools as both a teacher and administrator before joining the city in 2019. "We thought it would be a great idea if people saw the employees in their element."

For the next career fair, the city will produce similar television spots that will focus on employees who have multiple family members working for the city.

The hope is that more people will see working for the city as a career, Javis said.

To that end, the city offers training for its workers — particularly on those interpersonal "soft" skills that enable people to work better with fellow employees and the public. The city also offers management training for department heads and other executive employees to improve opportunities for promotions within the city and to create a leadership pipeline for the future.

"We have begun offering professional development courses to our employees," Javis said. "The next step is to have proscribed courses and have a way to get them on a track to a supervisory position."

Florence's twice-yearly hiring events now draw more than 200 people. Photo: City of Florence.

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Calendar

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

JANUARY

8 Newly Elected Session – You've Been Elected, Now What? Virtual. Topics include the programs and services of the Municipal Association of SC, the basics of effective meetings, the SC Freedom of Information Act and the SC Ethics Act.

15 Main Street SC Bonus Training – Time Management. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

21 Hometown Legislative Action Day. Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, Columbia. For more information, see page 2.

22 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government. Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, Columbia. Session A topics include the city as an employer, ethics, goal setting, planning, zoning and conducting effective meetings. Session B topics include business licensing tax administration, intergovernmental relations, municipal court and municipal liability. Advanced MEO topics include advocacy and intergovernmental relations and economic development. Advanced Continuing Education topics include leadership and code enforcement strategies.

29 – 31 Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Institute, Year 3, Session B Training. Cambria Hotel, Columbia. Topics include municipal law, records management, budgeting, negotiating and collaboration skills, as well as customer service.

FEBRUARY

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

18 – 19 Municipal Court Administration Association 101 Session C. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia. Topics include court financials.

26 Main Street SC 1st Quarter Managers' Training. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

MARCH

5 SC Business Licensing Officials Association Spring Academy. Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia.

10 – 12 SC Utility Billing Association Annual Meeting. Spartanburg Marriott, Spartanburg.

18 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government: Basic Budgeting and Municipal Finance. Regional Council of Government locations.

19 SC Association of Municipal Power Systems Associate Member Lunch. Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia.

20 SC Municipal Technology Association of SC Spring Meeting. Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia.

25 Risk Management Services: Defensive Driving Course. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

27 SC Association of Stormwater Managers First Quarter Meeting. Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia.

APRIL

8 Risk Management Services: OSHA Confined Space Competent Person Training. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

10 SC Municipal Finance Officers, Clerks and Treasurers Association Spring Academy. Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia.