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a publication of the Municipal Association of South Carolina

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Special Section: Sustainability

Small Cities SUMMIT
Coming August 13

Officials from South Carolina's smaller cities and towns will have an opportunity to gather in Columbia on Wednesday, August 13, for the Municipal Association of South Carolina's Small Cities Summit, a time to discuss the issues most significant to the municipalities of their size.

The Association gives registration preference for this event to those municipalities with a population of fewer than 3,000 residents. The event is a one-day meeting with conference sessions and a lunch.

The registration deadline for the Small Cities Summit is August 1. The meeting will take place at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, located at 1101 Lincoln St. in Columbia.

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

Association Highlight:
### *Forms and Powers of Municipal Government Handbook*

City officials and staff have access to numerous publications covering local government topics through the Municipal Association of SC, including the *Forms and Powers of Municipal Government* handbook, available at www.masc.sc (keyword: Forms and Powers).

Under South Carolina law, municipalities may choose to structure themselves with one of three forms of government: the mayor-council form, the council form or the council-manager form. Changing the form of government requires a referendum. The legislative functions of city and town councils work the same across all three forms, but other functions differ in important ways.

The handbook explains the powers given by state law to mayors, councils and city managers or administrators under the different forms. It also describes who performs administrative duties under each of the three structures, who supervises departments and appoints and removes employees, and when officials can delegate authority.

"Forms of Municipal Government" will also be one of the course sessions of the Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government on September 16. The institute will offer that session as well as "Municipal Economic Development" at the councils of governments offices in Florence, Georgetown, Greenville and North Charleston, and at the Municipal Association's office in Columbia. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: MEO Institute).
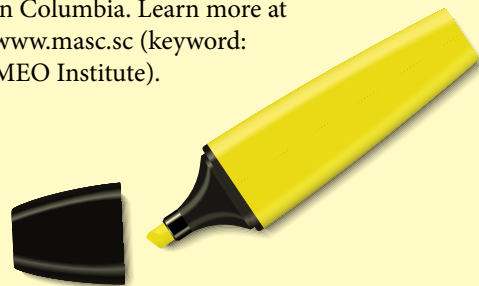
AI-assisted Work Still Needs Human Review

New applications of artificial intelligence technology have now generated great excitement, but it has also created expectations that it will disrupt many work processes. Generating written material or images that are not the direct output of humans means that using AI comes with many questions: when is it appropriate and professional, or when is it ethical?

At the SC Municipal Finance Officers, Clerks and Treasurers Association Spring Academy, Urica Floyd, the Municipal Association of SC staff associate for training and learning solutions, presented several AI services now in common use. The potential impact of AI will not be unlike other technology advances of recent history, she said.

"What AI is going to do for us is the same as what computers did for us in the early 1990s. It's just a transition from one tool to another, that's going to assist us in how we work every day."

The key point, she said, and perhaps the first rule of using AI, is that it can help humans, but it cannot utterly replace human effort and human judgment.

"You have to be involved," she said. "You can't just accept the results that AI spits out to you, you have to review. You have to read it carefully and edit all the generative AI content that you received."

She first took a look at ChatGPT, a conversational tool or chatbot that answers questions by generating human-like responses and written material. In the municipal government sphere, that could involve creating a starting point for draft documents like letters or proclamations, or it can help summarize longer documents as shorter ones, although users need to be careful to avoid uploading or inputting any confidential or sensitive information.

Floyd illustrated ChatGPT's function by prompting it to create names for a hypothetical food truck event organized by the City of Columbia. The prompt included some guidelines: both "Cola" and "Soda City" are common nicknames for Columbia.

ChatGPT answered the request with "Soda City Street Eats," "Cola Cuisine Carnival" and "Capital City Chow Down," as well as with potential written descriptions of such an event.

Floyd next reviewed Otter.ai, a tool that transcribes spoken language into written text and creates summaries of what was discussed. This makes it capable of processing recordings of meetings, lectures or interviews, and it can integrate with virtual meeting services as well, like Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet. While it can help save workers' time by rapidly creating transcriptions, which was once a laborious process, it can still fail to provide complete accuracy.

Demonstrating its abilities, she had it transcribe a brief recorded conversation of young children discussing caterpillars and butterflies. It transcribed their words, including the potentially challenging phrase "the caterpillar is making a chrysalis." It did not correctly detect that multiple children were speaking, however, as their voices had a similar pitch.

Finally, Floyd took a look at Microsoft Copilot Image Generator, which can work from text descriptions to generate visuals for presentations or publications, although there is an emerging expectation that AI-generated images need to be labeled as such. She used it to create an image of a female government employee at work, and made a series of adjustments to the woman's appearance, and even changed out the art style to make the woman resemble a comic book character.

When used with skill and discernment, Floyd said, AI allows people to "work smarter, create content and improve productivity."

General Assembly Passes Liquor Liability Reform, Military TIF Housing

On Thursday, May 8, the first half of the 126th South Carolina General Assembly was gaveled to a close. The 2025 legislative session was the first year of a two-year session, meaning that all bills that did not pass during this session will remain active for further debate and potential passage during the 2026 session.

The sine die resolution, S292, passed by both the House and Senate, allow the speaker of the SC House of Representatives and the president of the SC Senate to call legislators back to Columbia after the end of the regular session, but only for items specifically outlined in the resolution. This year's sine die resolution allows legislators to return to session to discuss the state budget along with local legislation, resolutions, gubernatorial vetoes and appointments. Other introduced legislation will remain on hold until next year.

The Senate and House could not come to an agreement on the state budget so they appointed a conference committee to debate the differences between their versions of the budget. Reps. Bruce Bannister (R-Greenville), Lee Hewitt (R-Georgetown) and Leon Stavrinakis (D-Charleston), as well as Sens. Harvey Peeler (R-Cherokee), Darrell Jackson (D-Richland) and Thomas Alexander (R-Oconee) were appointed as conferees to the budget conference committee.

Bills enacted into law

Several big issues made it across the finish line before time ran out and were ratified by the General Assembly and signed by the governor.

H3430 became the new version of the liquor liability bill, which aims to reduce liquor liability costs for bars and restaurants as significant premium hikes threatened their operations. The Municipal Association of SC identified resolving the growing liquor liability burden for small businesses as one of its Advocacy Initiatives for this session, as many restaurants have closed, reducing the business mix in downtown districts.

Originally, the language of H3430 dealt with appointing the state auditor, but the House amended the bill so that it only features liquor liability language in order to make the deadline of adjournment. The bill provides for a change in joint and several liability, so that liability does not apply to a defendant found to have less than 50% of fault. The bill also provides ways for restaurants and bars to lower insurance coverage through server training and other steps. It also lowers the amount of liquor liability insurance required for one-day festivals. The governor signed this bill into law on May 12.

H3333, the military tax increment financing district bill, was passed by both chambers, ratified and signed into law by the governor on May 8. This bill includes affordable housing as an allowable project in a TIF district, extends the bonding period for projects in a military TIF, and gives local governing bodies greater flexibility when using TIF funds outside of the TIF boundary.

H3309, the SC Energy Security Act, is a comprehensive legislative initiative that endeavors to overhaul the state's energy policies and regulatory framework to enhance energy reliability, diversify energy sources and stimulate economic development. The bill allows for a new natural gas plant through Santee Cooper and Dominion Energy, and allows for utilities to raise rates in smaller increments rather than larger increases. The governor signed this bill into law on May 12.

Bills that remain active

Other bills like the income tax reform bill, zero millage legislation and a cut to the tax on boats were passed by one chamber but did not make it out of the other. These bills, along with the 290 bills already in the Municipal Association of SC Legislative Tracking System are still active for the 2026 session. Find information on these remaining bills at www.masc.sc (keyword: Legislative Tracking System).

Find out more about the past legislative session, and what is likely to come up next year, at the Municipal Association's 2025 Annual Meeting, taking place July 16 – 20. Look for a more detailed overview in the Association's 2025 Legislative Report, *which will be available at the Annual Meeting and online.*

This article was written at the end of the regular session and is accurate as of May 14, 2025.

QUIZ

Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government
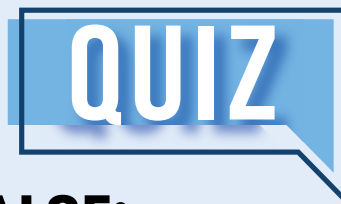
TRUE OR FALSE:

In the council-manager form of government for South Carolina municipalities, councilmembers are permitted to assist their city managers directly with the managers' day-to-day operations.

FALSE South Carolina's council-manager form of government is established in the SC Code of Law, Title 5, Chapter 13. In this form, the law prohibits the mayor and council members from interfering with the operation of the departments, offices and agencies under the direction of the manager.

The council may not

- have any involvement with the hiring or firing of employees under the manager, or
- deal directly with those employees, including by giving orders to them.

The council does, however, appoint city attorneys and city judges under the council-manager form.

Interference from a council in the council-manager form could look like contacting planning staff to tell them to deny a development permit, or contacting police or code enforcement to demand that a citation not be issued for an apparent violation. Training can help elected officials and staff understand their roles and use judgment to avoid interference, and cities wanting to prohibit interference formally should adopt an ordinance or policy for the purpose.

The Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government offers in-person and online courses. The next in-person courses, "Forms of Municipal Government" and "Municipal Economic Development," will take place September 16 at the councils of governments locations in Florence, Georgetown, Greenville and North Charleston, as well as at the Municipal Association of SC in Columbia. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: MEO Institute).
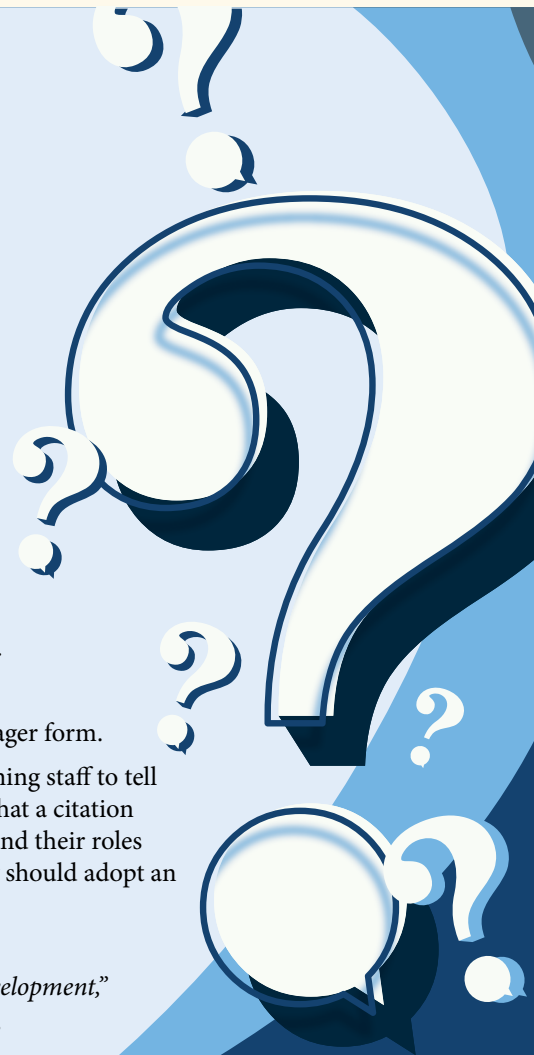
Risk Management Services Conference to Highlight Law Enforcement Requirements of Act 218

The Municipal Association of SC Risk Management Services will have its first-ever conference to discuss a wide range of risk-related concerns for cities and towns, taking place in Columbia on August 25 – 27. The conference will be free for members of the SC Municipal Insurance Trust and SC Municipal Insurance and Risk Financing Fund.

A key issue to be discussed is Act 218, also known as the Law Enforcement Betterment Bill, a law which codified many law enforcement standards statewide and aimed to improve safety in police practices. The law led to significant changes in the ways that South Carolina law enforcement organizations operate, and so all cities and towns with police departments need to audit their practices to ensure they are complying with its provisions.

Here are some key aspects of the law:

- **Officer certification** – All police recruits must complete their SC Criminal Justice Academy certification to work as police officers, or must otherwise be accompanied by a certified officer at all times.

- **Failure to intervene and misconduct reporting** – Act 218 established police officers' "willful failure to intervene" when they observe another officer abusing someone as a form of police misconduct. The law also requires law enforcement agencies to report officer misconduct to the SCCJA within 15 days of completing an internal investigation.

- **Chokeholds restricting airflow or carotid holds restricting bloodflow** – The law established that officers may only use these against a person in cases where the use of deadly force is justified, such as when a person's life is in danger.

Minimum standards and policies

Act 218 also updated and mandated a set of minimum standards for law enforcement agencies as adopted by the SC Law Enforcement Training Council. Risk Management Services drafted model policies for each of the standards, available for use by all cities and towns at www.masc.sc (keyword: law enforcement model policies).

The minimum standard policies involve these points:

- **Use of force and response to active resistance** – The use of force policy outlines the force that officers may use in a variety of circumstances, including verbal commands, "soft empty hand control," "hard hand control," and in extreme situations where life must be protected, deadly force.

- **Uniform vehicle pursuit and emergency vehicle operation standards** – These policies cover the factors that police must consider when initiating a pursuit, pursuit restrictions, ongoing evaluations of the pursuit and reasons for ending a pursuit.

- **Duty to intervene** – The policy requires officers to prevent or stop the unreasonable use of force, any unethical act, or any act that violates state or federal law, ordinance or agency policy.

- **Hiring and terminating practices** – The policy states that the department will hire only qualified candidates, as it "seeks the highest level of professionalism and integrity by its members."

- **Body-worn cameras** – This standard indicates the circumstances when they must operate these cameras, and how they must handle the recordings created.

- **Search warrants** – This set of model polices addresses the steps that officers must use to obtain warrants, and steps to take when executing "no-knock" warrants.

- **Systems and processes for filing and investigating complaints** – This covers how to handle reports of officer misconduct.

- **Early-warning system for at-risk officer behavior** – This establishes a system for identifying and addressing those "employees exhibiting symptoms of stress or other behavior that could pose a liability to the community, the Department or the officer."

Other topics at the Risk Management Services Conference include First Amendment auditors and sovereign citizens, reducing risk in terminations, changing weather patterns in South Carolina, cybersecurity, and public works policies and procedures. Registration information will include a discounted hotel room rate, and registration will open June 30. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: Association events).

Fly the Flag the Right Way

From Flag Day on June 14 to the Fourth of July, summertime has many opportunities for U.S. flag displays, but it's always important to fly the flag correctly.

First codified into law in 1942, Public Law 94-344, or the U.S. Flag Code, spells out the appropriate way to display the national flag. While the federal law has no penalties for breaking the standards that it sets out, it nonetheless provides a guide to how to handle the flag respectfully. Improper flag display can be an easily noticed, controversial issue.

Here are some key points to consider to keep a city's flag displays in accordance with the law:

Times for flying the flag

Flags are customarily flown only from sunrise to sunset, but flying them after dark while properly illuminated is also considered appropriate.

Determining if a flag should be flown in weather conditions such as rain or high winds depends on how it is made. Weather damage to the flag should be avoided, but all-weather flags can be appropriately displayed in bad weather.

Half-staff displays

When raising a flag for a half-staff display, the person raising the flag should first hoist it to the top of the pole before lowering it halfway. When taking the flag down, raise it again to the top of the pole, then lower it.

The right to order half-staff displays is reserved for the President of the United States and for governors, who can make the order for their states. The governor of South Carolina may order half-staff observances in tribute to firefighters and law enforcement officers who die in the line of duty or after a South Carolina resident and member of the military dies in combat. A half-staff display is also considered appropriate based on reliable information that the current or former U.S. president, current U.S. vice president, current or former U.S. Supreme Court chief justice, or current speaker of the house has died.

The State of South Carolina has a webpage, www.sc.gov/flag-status, providing the current status of half-mast observances, and offers email alerts for observances as well.

There are a number of customary days to fly flags at half-staff:

- Peace Officers Memorial Day, May 15, unless it coincides with Armed Forces Day (sunrise – sunset);
- Memorial Day, last Monday in May (sunrise – noon);
- Patriot Day, September 11 (sunrise – sunset);
- National Firefighters Memorial Day, typically a Sunday during Fire Prevention Week in October (sunrise – sunset); and
- Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day, December 7 (sunrise – sunset).

Indoor flag display

Position the national flag to the right of a speaker or a stage area. Place other flags, such as the South Carolina state flag, to the left. When hanging the national flag on a wall, always position the star field, an element known as the "union," at the top and to the left, even when in a vertical orientation.

Flag disposal

A ceremonial retirement in which the flag is burned should take place when a flag becomes too soiled or worn for display. The most common example of excess wear is when the fly — or loose portion facing away from the pole — becomes shredded. Many veterans' groups and Scouting America troops provide flag retirement services.

A popular misconception holds that any flag that has touched the ground must be destroyed. While care should be taken to keep the flag from touching the ground, contact with the ground does not require destruction.

The U.S. government provides rules on flying the flag correctly at www.usa.gov/flag.

Cheraw Makes Its Case to Attract Remote Workers

By Rob Wolfe, Town Manager, Town of Cheraw

The Town of Cheraw celebrated its 48th Spring Festival in 2025. Photo: Town of Cheraw.

Like many rural communities, the Town of Cheraw is facing a dilemma. On one hand, it is a beautiful town full of great people, a vibrant historic district with charming architecture, unique local businesses and abundant outdoor recreation opportunities along the scenic Pee Dee River. On the other hand, the town has recently faced population decline. To capitalize on local assets and foster economic growth, Cheraw partnered with the Rural Growth Initiative to launch Cheraw Remote, a pilot program designed to attract remote workers by leveraging the shift toward remote employment following the COVID-19 pandemic and the statewide expansion of high-speed internet. The underlying idea was that urban residents with remote jobs might consider relocating to smaller communities, provided those communities could effectively capture their attention.

Many may remember the media buzz surrounding Tulsa Remote in 2020, a program offering remote workers $10,000 to relocate to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Without the resources to offer similar monetary incentives, Cheraw needed to differentiate itself creatively. After internal discussions, it became clear that Tulsa Remote's success was driven more by media attention than the financial incentive itself. Realistically, a high-income remote worker was unlikely to move solely for a $10,000 bonus; however, Tulsa gained valuable mindshare among individuals already considering relocation. Cheraw sought a similar impact — without the high cost.

The solution was to partner with Timothy Sinclair, a marketing firm that helped craft and launch the Cheraw Remote brand. Our unique hook was offering a highly personalized introduction to the community from me as the town manager, including a welcoming phone call, a guided town tour and even a dinner invitation. Targeted digital ads were placed in key markets such as Charlotte, strategically focusing on Cheraw's strengths: an affordable cost of living, outstanding local amenities, abundant outdoor activities and a friendly small-town atmosphere that invites genuine community engagement — a notable contrast to the anonymity often experienced in large cities.

The response to Cheraw Remote exceeded initial expectations. Ultimately, I conducted around 70 personalized phone calls to potential relocators. Even as a modest pilot with limited investment, this outreach was highly effective: approximately 20% of contacts represented genuinely interested individuals eager to learn more about Cheraw. At least three families visited to explore the community firsthand, resulting in one verbal commitment to relocate. Additionally, one individual — who had not been directly contacted but was influenced by the targeted ads — has committed to moving to Cheraw in the summer of 2025.
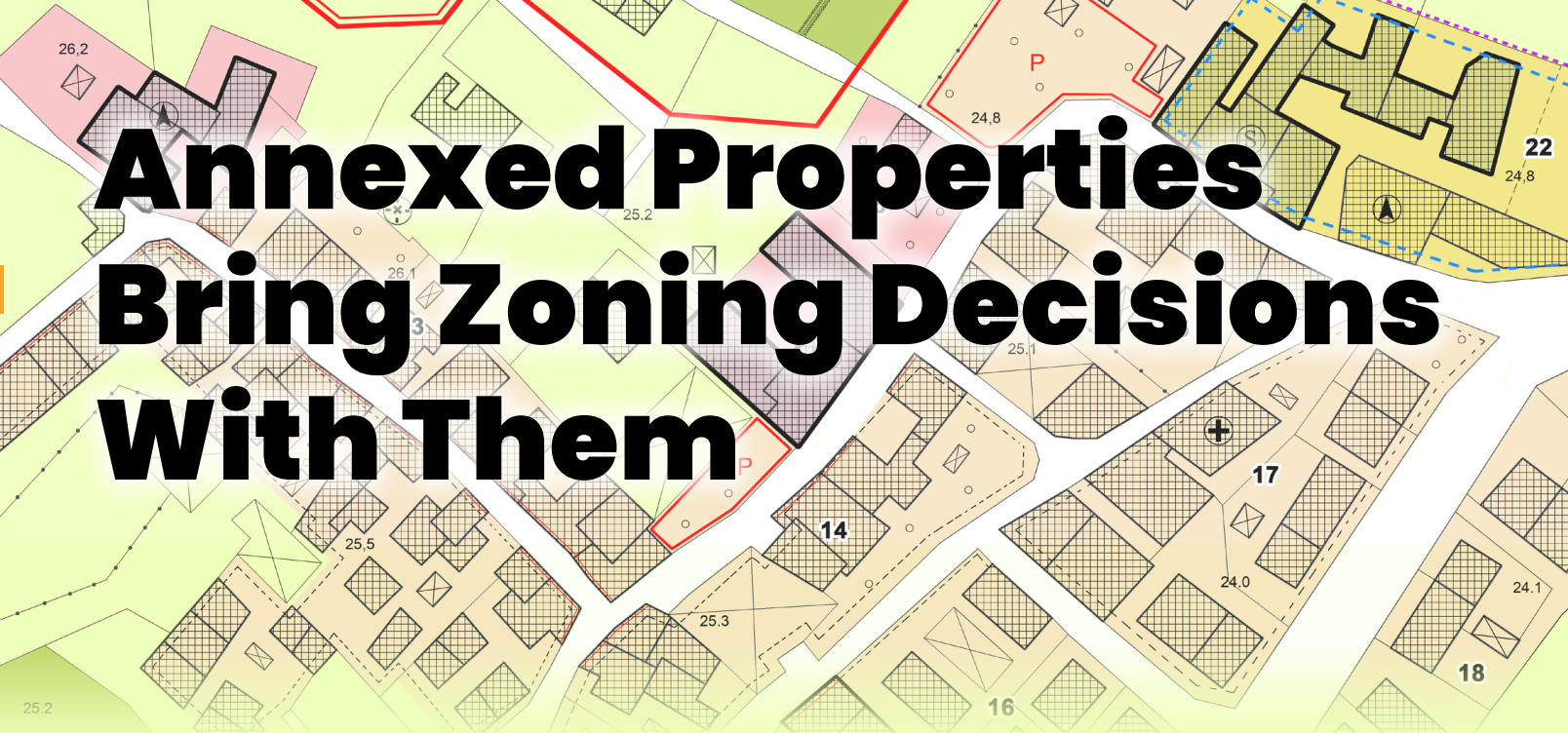
Overall, Cheraw Remote successfully demonstrated the power of targeted marketing and personalized community engagement as affordable, impactful strategies for rural revitalization.

Annual Meeting to Discuss Attracting Remote Workers

The Town of Cheraw team will be among those presenting during the Municipal Association's 2025 Annual Meeting, addressing their initiative to attract remote workers.

The Annual Meeting will take place July 17 – 20 at the Hilton Beachfront Resort on Hilton Head Island. Find more details and agenda information at www.masc.sc (keyword: Annual Meeting) and by downloading the Association's app from the App Store or Google Play by searching for "Municipal Association of SC." All meeting registrations must be complete by July 3.

Annexed Properties Bring Zoning Decisions With Them

For municipalities that have a zoning ordinance, they must assign a zoning classification to every parcel that they annex. Assigning a zoning classification to a new parcel necessitates an amendment to the zoning ordinance updating the municipality's zoning map. State law, however, does not provide for a streamlined zoning process when annexing property. This means that each annexed parcel should likely undergo the full rezoning process of notice, public hearing and planning commission recommendation.

However, a city or town council cannot assign a zoning classification until after the annexation of a parcel is complete. This is because municipalities do not have jurisdiction over a parcel, for zoning or for any other purpose, until it has been annexed.

This distinction can create tension between the annexation process and the zoning process. Municipalities should carefully consider the process for every annexed parcel to make sure it is assigned a zoning classification that complies with state and municipal requirements — and there are several ways to do this.

Concurrent approach

One strategy to ensure compliance with all legal processes is to undertake both the annexation and the zoning steps simultaneously. This involves the council adopting two separate ordinances: one approving the annexation of the property, and another assigning a zoning classification.

The ordinances can receive second reading and become adopted by council at the same meeting but, notably, council should consider the annexation ordinance before it considers the zoning classification ordinance. This ensures that the parcel is formally located within the municipality's jurisdiction before it receives its zoning classification assignment.

In adopting a zoning classification ordinance, state law requires two steps that can present timing challenges during this concurrent process. Prior to the council adopting the zoning classification ordinance two steps must occur:

- The planning commission should make a zoning classification recommendation. It needs to be contingent upon the annexation.

- Also, the appropriate body, either the planning commission or council as established by the municipality's zoning ordinance, must conduct a public hearing on the matter, subject to the applicable notice requirements.

Timing constraints and administrative details associated with these two requirements may create challenges for some municipalities attempting to undertake this concurrent approach. Careful consideration should be given to the sequence of events to make sure that legal requirements are met, and avoid procedural pitfalls.

Temporary zoning classification

An alternative approach is to apply a standard temporary zoning classification to all properties upon annexation. This approach is particularly useful in managing the transition period and maintaining regulatory control.

The temporary classification provides a stopgap measure, ensuring that the property is not left unregulated while the full zoning process is completed post-annexation. The municipality should not grant any development approvals while under this temporary classification.

After annexation, the planning commission and the council should undertake the full zoning amendment procedures specified in SC Code Section 6-29-760.

While this method offers a practical solution, municipalities need to be mindful of potential issues with expediency. If the process experiences delays, then due process issues may arise.

Analogous zoning classification

Some municipalities assign a zoning classification to newly annexed parcels based on the existing county zoning.

In this approach, the municipality assigns either

- the same classification as the county had used, if the zoning ordinances are consistent; or
- the most closely analogous classification to that already assigned to the parcel by the county.

Although this approach may well comply with the Comprehensive Planning Enabling Act, there are no reported court decisions in South Carolina upholding it. Accordingly, the Municipal Association of SC generally recommends — especially for highly visible or controversial annexations — that the municipality observe the full rezoning process of notice, public hearing and planning commission recommendation.

Effective navigation requires foresight

Municipalities in South Carolina must navigate the interplay between annexation and zoning with foresight. Decisions on annexation and zoning can be emotionally fraught and politically charged.

Additionally, property owners may have significant economic interest in the process, and could therefore be motivated to initiate litigation if they disagree with a decision. Any missteps in the annexation or zoning process could result in legal repercussions for the municipality.

To ensure consistency in handling annexations and zoning classifications, cities and towns should clearly establish a process in their zoning ordinances. Each method considered has its advantages and potential challenges, and municipalities should tailor their approach to fit their specific circumstances. It's important to note that alternative approaches not discussed here may be better suited for certain situations, such as cases where there is a joint planning commission.

Ultimately, recognizing the need to adequately address the zoning of a parcel in compliance with state law is key to minimizing legal risks and ensuring a smooth transition for newly annexed properties.

SC Law Enforcement Division Offers Cybersecurity Resources

The SC Law Enforcement Division, through its SC Critical Infrastructure Cybersecurity initiative, has built resources for cyber threat intelligence and cybersecurity practices, found at www.sccic.sc.gov.

Some of its offerings include IT security assessments, cyber threat intelligence, and security training and awareness exercises for governmental services, among Department of Homeland Security-identified critical-infrastructure entities. It also provides these entities a means of reporting cyber incidents to SLED and the SC CIC Task Force.

The website also connects users to cyber threat profiles for sectors including energy, transportation, water and wastewater systems developed by SC CIC and The Citadel, and it outlines grant opportunities as well.

Are You Prepared for Hurricane Damage?

Hurricane season is a serious risk management threat in South Carolina.

In 2024, Hurricane Helene brought an estimated $78.7 billion in damages to multiple states, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and in South Carolina, some of that damage came to far-inland communities that rarely experience hurricane impacts. The early hurricane season predictions from Colorado State University have called for above-average storm activity during the 2025 season, with potentially four major hurricanes.

Like other forms of severe weather, hurricanes and tropical storms can hurt a city's ability to maintain its services, and they can create significant and costly insurance issues as well. There are numerous items that municipal leaders should check at the beginning of hurricane season:

Review the city's property coverage contract.

Be sure to understand the valuation of covered property, and especially whether the listed asset values are up to date for potential claims involving property damage, business interruption and other coverage areas.

Be aware of any contractual limits in the insurance coverage, as well as deductibles and loss-reporting requirements, since these rules can be complex for catastrophic losses. For example, the SC Municipal Insurance and Risk Financing Fund coverage contract has limitations for properties that are eligible for coverage through the National Flood Insurance Program. SCMIRF also has deductibles that apply specifically in coastal counties when damage has been caused by a "named storm," when the tropical cyclone was intense enough to officially receive a name from the National Hurricane Center.

City officials also need to know if flood events are covered, and if that coverage is excluded for any specific locations. They should also know how "storm surge" is defined in the contract; how the contract addresses the costs of business interruption, like revenue or extra expenses; any restrictions the coverage places on the timing and location of rebuilding; and deadline requirements on filing proof of loss.

Determine if there are ways to better secure property against hurricane damage.

There are numerous important steps to take for at-risk assets when a storm is approaching:

- Relocate high-value assets such as fire trucks, fleet vehicles or other equipment away from low-lying, flood-prone areas.
- Secure facility doors and board up windows to protect from flying debris.
- Remove or secure outdoor items to prevent them from becoming flying objects in high winds.
- Clear rain gutters and downspouts and check drain pumps.

Make sure the city has plans for emergency response and business continuity.

Review the city's crisis management procedures and business continuity plans for any needed updates. Officials need to consider potential impacts of both direct or indirect hits from a major storm for their residents, employees, and the vendors that would be involved in storm recovery. They should also work to establish coordinated response procedures with other local government agencies and emergency services. Cities should consider preventive maintenance on backup resources, like power generators.

Establish emergency notification and evacuation plans for employees.

Cities need to have emergency contact lists established, and can plan out work-from-home procedures when it is possible and appropriate for employees. Plenty of first responders and other essential workers cannot work remotely in an emergency, and will need many critical supplies — potable water, nonperishable food, first-aid kits, flashlights, handheld radios or cell phones.

Be ready to handle the insurance claim process.

Keep critical financial records at a site secure from flood or wind damage. Maintain detailed tracking of all documentation requests, such as what was requested, who requested it, who responded and when and to whom the information was sent.

For questions on hurricane planning, response and recovery issues, contact losscontrol@masc.sc. Learn more in the South Carolina Hurricane Guide *of the Emergency Management Division at www. scemd.org.*

Development Methods Can Drive Stormwater Solutions

In South Carolina, Mount Pleasant has been a pioneer in incentivizing development with as little stormwater impact as possible. Photo: Town of Mount Pleasant.

The unprecedented numbers of new residents coming to South Carolina in recent years have intensified development patterns and placed greater demands on infrastructure and resources in many parts of the state.

Among the other challenges to come from all of this growth are how to maintain the health of the state's waterways, and how to address the accelerating needs of stormwater management. Several municipalities, including the Town of Mount Pleasant, the City of Greenville and the City of Myrtle Beach, are now leading by example with sustainable approaches to flood mitigation and low-impact development.

In recent decades, the Town of Mount Pleasant has seen substantial growth, and the new developments come with the added environmental challenge of its coastal location.

Kevin Mitchell, the town's deputy director of engineering and development services, oversees the department responsible for a revolutionary low-impact development program for all proposed new builds. Mitchell, who holds a civil engineering degree and a master's degree in city and regional planning, has been with the town for more than 26 years.

"I think Mount Pleasant was one of the first in South Carolina to actually have a program just for site development to encourage and incentivize low-impact development techniques," Mitchell said, explaining that floodwater is one of the many components. "There is a flooding component to it, because we are encouraging and incentivizing the reduction of impervious surfaces and the reuse of water for irrigation, those types of uses."

The town adopted the Environmental Guidelines for Land Development, as the program is called, in 2023. Four main impact categories guide its mission: the conservation and restoration of natural water resources; the protection and improvement of ecosystem biodiversity; the improvement of community livability in areas like mobility, aesthetics and well-being; and the promotion of energy efficiency and sustainable material resources.

Mitchell said that all of the proposed new construction in the town fall under these guidelines. To date, 53 acres, or approximately 16 commercial projects, have complied with the program.

"Those are our four impact categories and that's how our program is set up, to make sure that there is a good robust environmental site design and not just [design] solely focused on stormwater," he said.

In the Upstate, the City of Greenville's City Engineer, Paul Dow, explained the importance of considering waterways and floodplains when thinking about proposed development.

"I've been lucky that city council and city managers are on board with thinking about the waterways first — thinking about development and how it impacts the waterways, and then going from there backwards, as opposed to that being the last thing considered."

Greenville has a robust commercial development program that engineers and designs for the mitigation of increased stormwater impacts, according to Dow. One recent example is Unity Park, which opened in 2022.

"Unity Park is entirely in a floodplain," he said. "[We wanted] to create an example on a sunny day of what a new development could do and have a low impact example, and then on a rainy day, have an area that is resilient to flooding because flooding is inevitable in a floodplain."

Dow explained that Unity Park is a great example of an appropriate use of a floodplain.

Jan. 4, 2023
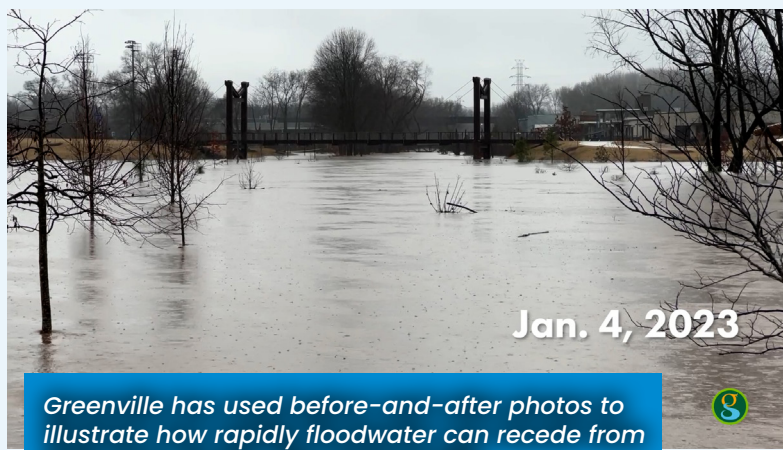
Greenville has used before-and-after photos to illustrate how rapidly floodwater can recede from Unity Park. Photos: City of Greenville.

"When you pull in at Unity Park, there is what looks like really robust landscaping, really pretty parking medians, way wider than your typical parking lot," he continued. "Some have zero vegetation between the car in front of you, and some have a small strip — Unity Park has a very wide strip of vegetation. Bioswales are what they are, and they take in a vast amount of water and the vegetation soaks it up, it gets filtered, and there is vegetative uptake of pollutants."

On a larger scale, "floodplain benches" were cut out by the river at a certain elevation so that when the river rises, the water can spread out and release its energy.

Myrtle Beach's flood control efforts include parking lots built of permeable pavers. Photo: City of Myrtle Beach.

"We use Unity Park as an example of a good alternative for stormwater control," Dow said.

The City of Myrtle Beach has implemented several low-impact development practices to mitigate flooding, including the installation of bioswales, permeable pavers and other stormwater control measures.

Liudmila "Mila" Maslova, the city's stormwater program supervisor, and her team oversee the management of the existing stormwater conveyance systems.

These include "miles of documented streams, swales, roadside ditches, closed pipe conveyances, over 40 beach outfalls, ponds and [best management practices]," Maslova said.

One example of a low-impact development practice is the grass swales installed in some of the street medians off of Kings Highway which are maintained by the Parks and Recreation Department.

Additionally, the Capital Improvements Projects team oversees a Stormwater Improvement Project and its implementation of low-impact development practices, Maslova said.

"These stormwater control measures slow down and treat the stormwater runoff from the roadways, driveways and other impervious surfaces," she added.

Two recent examples included the installation of permeable pavers in the parking lot of the Grand Strand Brewing Company, which Maslova explained allowed for underground and surface

24 hours later

stormwater control and storage, and in a separate project, permeable pavers installed at Charlie's Place, a historic nightclub where the city has a vendor market and will offer business incubator units.

At the Clemson Cooperative Extension, Susan Lunt serves as the Carolina Clear coordinator and Water Resources Extension associate. She often presents on stormwater topics for the SC Association of Stormwater Managers, whose members include the staff members of municipalities and county governments.

"Our goal at Carolina Clear is to help municipalities with meeting stormwater permit requirements, and part of that is educating," she said. "A big part of our job is educational outreach to the public, whether that's a residential community, commercial, private – whoever it may be – to help them protect stormwater, which ultimately gets into our state waterways. That's why it's so important, because [this water] becomes our source drinking water, this impacts our environment, our climate, and our two largest industries: agriculture and tourism … If stormwater is not managed properly, this would have a huge economic impact on our state, so we want to protect it to be good Earth stewards, but also to help protect our economy."

Lunt explained that "those communities that are able to contain [stormwater] with what is currently existing in the infrastructure with the roadways and then mimic what nature had done prior to having those roadways being put in, and turn that water into some sort of engineered system — such as swales, incorporating plants, different buffers — they're going to be able to take the excess amount of water during that storm event. They'll be able to temporarily hold it, and allow it to infiltrate. Those [communities] are where we are seeing the success … Any place that they're able to marry these low-impact development practices in, is a wonderful bonus to the community."

As South Carolina continues to draw people and industries to the state, the need for stormwater management, flood prevention and low-impact development practices has grown along with the population. Through sustainable building and stormwater management practices that mimic nature, municipalities are implementing more sustainable and environmentally friendly solutions to mitigate a common problem.

Focused Cleanups Make for Healthy Waterways

Volunteers gather at the May River for Bluffton's 35th Beach Sweep/River Sweep in 2024. Photo: Town of Bluffton.

Clean waterways are essential for cities and towns, affecting everything from tourism to economic development and quality of life issues.

In Bluffton, leaders like to say the May River, a tidal river with no freshwater source at its headwaters, has been the figurative and literal backbone of the Lowcountry town since its establishment in the 1800s.

"We have high-salinity waters that result in expansive salt marshes, and it's an oasis for oysters, crabs and fin fish," said Beth Lewis, Bluffton's water quality program manager. "So it's important to us both historically and culturally, as well as the economic impacts that it provides to the community."

Working to improve its water quality — especially after the state of South Carolina downgraded the May River's shellfish harvesting classification in 2009 — is an important mission for the town.

South Carolina's shellfish sanitation program monitors shellfish areas to ensure that harvested oysters meet health and environmental quality standards. In 2007, the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control — forerunner of the present-day SC Department of Environmental Services — reported to Bluffton that the fecal coliform levels were increasing in the May River. In 2009, the May River received its first-ever shellfish harvesting classification downgrade, meaning that shellfish harvesting was restricted in that portion of the river.

Fecal coliform bacteria are an indicator of water quality degradation, and concentrations of the bacteria can offer clues to problems such as untreated sewage from failing septic systems or wildlife.

In 2009, the Town of Bluffton developed the May River Watershed Action Plan in partnership with Beaufort County and its community stakeholders. Adopted by town council in 2011, the document aims to restore and protect water quality in the May River, focusing on what Lewis called "the four P's" — policies, programs, projects and partnerships.

In 2021, after the town had continuously collected data and as scientific knowledge on stormwater management had grown, the town updated the action plan to develop a stormwater model in the May River headwaters to understand the movement of fecal coliform better.

"It helps us understand how the bacteria are getting to the river," Lewis said. "We're not necessarily focused on the impairment in the river, but we're interested in what's happening in the watershed."

The town uses microbial source tracking to help look for human sources, including sampling to determine if failing septic systems are contributing to the impairment. That data is used by the town to drive its septic-to-sewer conversion program, which promotes sanitary sewer extension projects.

The town is now implementing eight projects recommended in the 2021 update of the action plan, including an impervious-surface restoration program that identifies areas with hard pavement where water runs off rather than soaking into the ground. Lewis said education remains a big part of what Bluffton does, helping residents and contractors understand ways they can prevent stormwater pollution through individual actions.

The initial shellfish harvesting restrictions from 2009 remain in place today — evidence of the long-term commitment needed to address water quality.

"Obviously our impairment still exists today, so it doesn't happen overnight," she said. "We are just continuously taking those lessons learned to make more informed decisions."

Along with the other efforts, hundreds of volunteers help clean up the May River during two large river cleanups a year. Nicole Wright, the town's stormwater

technician, spearheads the cleanup events.

"We get a bunch of groups together. We partner with a local school and we bring out some educational partners," Wright said. "So, while people are picking up litter, they're also learning about the community around them and what they can do to be better stewards to the environment."

At the last event, Bluffton collected 1,710 pounds of waste and were able to divert 479 pounds of that by recycling plastic, aluminum, glass and cardboard.

Other cities and towns around the state have partnered with PalmettoPride, South Carolina's anti-litter organization, to install Watergoat devices in their waterways as a way to help divert and collect litter.

The Watergoat is a litter entrapment system that places a floating net across a river or stream to act as a barrier to catch trash before it moves downstream, said Joseph Berry, special projects manager for PalmettoPride. Once the litter is caught, it can be removed for proper disposal.

"The Watergoat is not as invasive as other systems, and we feel it is easier to manage in collecting litter from the waterway," Berry said.

PalmettoPride has worked with municipalities, counties and other organizations through the state to deploy the devices, with 13 installed and more planned.

"Typically, organizations and local governments reach out to us about

the system and we work with them to complete the application and get scheduled for a setup. We are able to provide the system, with the understanding that the local organization will maintain the Watergoat once installed," he said. "Maintenance is low effort for the system and only requires regular cleaning out to ensure it as effective as possible."

One of the municipalities to take advantage of the program is Florence, where a Watergoat was installed on Gully Branch in Timrod Park, using Keep Florence Beautiful grant funding from PalmettoPride.

Geraldine Cuypers, a board member of Keep Florence Beautiful and the former discharge stormwater compliance inspector for the City of Florence, said placing the Watergoat near the park was an important way to spread the word about littler.

"People walk in that area in Timrod Park, and they can see the volume of trash that would go into our waterway," she said.

She said trash will get swept into the waterways, especially after heavy rainfalls. The main items picked out of the Watergoat by the city's stormwater compliance group are plastic and foam single-use items, along with cigarette butts.

"It's quite a heavy device, and it has a chain on the bottom that goes down a foot or two, so fish and stuff can still go under. But it's cool because the turtles also get on top of it and sunbathe," Cuypers said.

The SC Department of Environmental Services also identified the James Island Creek Watershed as an impaired waterbody due to high levels of fecal bacteria. The Town of James Island, the James Island Public Service District, Charleston Water System and state agencies and representatives are working to improve the water quality in the creek, said Ashley Kellahan, district manager for the James Island Public Service District.

The town is partnering with the district to work on a public sewer expansion, she said.

"Part of our plan to combat this issue involves connecting 185 property owners to the public sewer system and properly abandoning septic tanks on parcels lying on or near this watershed," Kellahan said.

The district, who operates the wastewater system, received an $8.7 million grant through the South Carolina Infrastructure Investment Program, and construction, which began in October 2024 and is still underway. The town and district also received $3.2 million to help cover the cost of tying in residents to the public sewer system.

Kellahan said the district also partners with the town on pet waste stations around James Island, which feature pet waste bag dispensers and a can that is emptied on the regular garbage collection route. The program started in 2020, and an estimated 4 tons of pet waste was properly disposed in the first year – waste that did not end up in drainage systems and waterways, she said.

The Watergoats deployed around the state with help from PalmettoPride include this one in North Charleston. Photo: PalmettoPride.

Calendar

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

JUNE

1 – 4 SC Association of Municipal Power Systems Annual Meeting. Sonesta Resort, Hilton Head Island. Topics include harnessing artificial intelligence and data for electric utilities, emergency preparedness and joint pole use agreements.

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

11 – 13 Main Street SC Annual Retreat. City of Aiken Municipal Building. Topics include the structuring of the Aiken Downtown Development Association, marketing material development, Main Street program websites and mitigating disasters in downtown districts.

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

12 SC Association of Stormwater Managers Second Quarter Meeting. Hilton Garden Inn Columbia Downtown. Topics include the Catawba Nation rivercane project, addressing bacteria impairments in watersheds and impacts of harmful algal blooms.

24 – 25 Municipal Court Administration Association 101 Session A. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia. Topics include a judicial system overview, case lifecycles, types of proceedings, bonds and courtroom processing.

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

JULY

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

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

16 – 20 Municipal Association of SC Annual Meeting. Hilton Beachfront Resort and Spa, Hilton Head Island. For more information, see page 8.

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

AUGUST

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

13 Small Cities Summit. Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. For more information, see page 2.

19 Business License Essentials. Virtual.

20 – 22 Municipal Court Administration Association of SC Annual Meeting. SpringHill Suites, Downtown Greenville.

25 – 27 Risk Management Services Conference. Hilton Garden Inn, Downtown Columbia.

SEPTEMBER

4 SC Association of Stormwater Managers Third Quarter Meeting and Exhibitor Showcase. Location to be determined.

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