**MASC** Municipal Association of South Carolina

# HLAD to Address Local Authority and Engagement on February 4

Hometown Legislative Action Day is a time for municipal officials to come together in Columbia to discuss how best to get involved in legislative issues and meet with members of the General Assembly. This year, the gathering will delve into the issues of local authority and preemption.

Several elected officials will speak at HLAD, beginning with Sen. Harvey Peeler as the keynote speaker.

Peeler was elected president of the Senate in 2019, a position which until that time was fulfilled by the lieutenant governor. He serves District 14, which covers Cherokee County as well as parts of Spartanburg, Union and York counties. A native and resident of Gaffney, Peeler has served in the Senate since 1981. He chairs the Interstate Cooperation and Legislative Oversight committees,

and also serves on the Education, Ethics, Finance, Medical Affairs and Transportation committees.

Sen. Marlon Kimpson will be the lunch speaker later in the day. First elected to the Senate in a 2013 race to fill an unexpired term, Kimpson represents District 42, which includes parts of Charleston and Dorchester counties. He serves on the Corrections and Penology, Judiciary, Medical Affairs, Rules and Transportation committees.

At a legislative panel in the morning, some members of the General Assembly will discuss current issues involving local authority for cities and towns. The powers exercised by city and town councils in South Carolina are governed by the state

## In This Issue

*(Far left) State Senate President Harvey Peeler will be the keynote speaker at Hometown Legislative Action Day. (Left) Sen. Marlon Kimpson will speak during the lunch session.*

constitution and the SC Code of Laws. A number of bills from the 2019 session impact the scope of powers granted to municipalities.

Another session will take a look at the role of branding in attracting economic development opportunities and the ways in which branding efforts can draw in people who want to live, work, visit or do business in a city or town. This session will feature representatives of the Charleston Area Convention & Visitors Bureau as well as Visit Lake City SC and the City of Travelers Rest. The afternoon will feature a session on municipal election administration.

Sessions of the Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government will take place at the Columbia Marriott on February 5, the day after HLAD. Those attending MEO may attend either Session A, which includes sessions on conducting public meetings, planning and zoning, among others; or Session B, with sessions including business license tax administration, ethics and public accountability, and intergovernmental relations. Officials must attend Session A before they may attend Session B.

The Advanced Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government, open to MEO graduates, will also host two sessions on February 5: "Advanced Budgeting and Finance" and "Advanced Leadership and Governance." The Advanced Continuing Education track, open to Advanced MEO graduates, will offer a morning session of "Harassment Prevention: What Everyone Needs to Know" and an afternoon session of "Municipal Elections 101."

The preregistration deadline for both HLAD and the Municipal Elected Officials Institute is January 23. Find more information at www.masc.sc (keyword: HLAD). Download the Hometown Legislative Action Day app to connect with speakers and other attendees, receive meeting updates and post comments about the sessions. Find the app at l.masc.sc/2020HLADapp, or download it either from the App Store or on Google Play by searching for MuniAssnSC.

## 2019 – 2020 Municipal Association Advocacy Initiatives

Two of the Municipal Association's Advocacy Initiatives for the two-year cycle have already been achieved in 2019:

- The General Assembly passed Act 84, providing improved funding reliability for municipalities from the Local Government Fund.
- The state budget included $3.2 million in recurring funding for the SC Criminal Justice Academy, which can help decrease wait times for admitting new officers.

One initiative remains: flexibility with hospitality and accommodations tax. In 2019, the Senate passed S217, which gives municipalities the ability to use revenues from these taxes to control and repair flooding and drainage in tourist-related areas. S217 is now in the House Ways and Means Committee for consideration, and advocacy efforts from cities and towns in the coming year can help it cross the finish line.

# Achievement Award Season Has Arrived

The deadline to submit an entry for the Municipal Association of South Carolina's Achievement Awards is Wednesday, January 29.

The Achievement Awards program serves as a celebration of excellent local government programs. It also gives cities and towns a great way to highlight what they do on behalf of their residents and businesses, and it is a valuable way for municipalities to see others' successful efforts around the state.

The entry form and full details are available online at www.masc.sc (keyword: achievement awards), along with videos and descriptions highlighting winners in past years.

Municipalities have a few decisions to make when creating an application. First, they need to select a project that is substantially complete. Projects that have been submitted previously, but did not win, are only eligible to be submitted one additional time.

Second, municipalities with a population of 20,000 or less can choose to compete in either a population or subject category. Cities and towns with more than 20,000 residents may compete in only one of the five subject categories: communications, economic development, public safety, public service or public works.

After applications are received, the city-designated contact person for each entry will receive confirmation of receipt by email no later than Friday, January 31. Those competing in a subject category will make an oral presentation to a panel of judges at the Municipal Association's office on either February 24 or 25. Association staff will assign presentation times after receiving all entries. The Association will recognize award winners at the Annual Meeting Awards Breakfast held in Charleston on July 18.

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

# Inman's Huff to Serve as President

At its December meeting, the Municipal Association of South Carolina's board of directors made changes to its composition.

Mayor Cornelius Huff of Inman, previously the Association's first vice president, will now serve as the Association's president, as Dennis Raines, former mayor of Mauldin, is no longer in elected office. Huff was elected mayor of Inman in 2014 after serving 12 years as a councilmember. He has served on the Municipal Association's board since 2016.

"I'm honored to serve as president of the Municipal Association of SC and look forward to working with all levels of government to keep moving our cities and towns forward," said Huff. "We are

*Mayor Cornelius Huff of Inman.*

truly one South Carolina and our residents deserve elected leaders who work together for the benefit of everyone."

Other board changes occurred in December as well. Councilmember Kathy Pender of Rock Hill will move up to first vice president and Mayor Rick Osbon of Aiken will become second vice president. Williston Mayor Jason Stapleton will advance from his board position to the executive board as the third vice president.

Georgetown Mayor Brendon M. Barber Sr. was selected to fill the unexpired term of former Myrtle Beach Councilmember Mary Jeffcoat, who is also no longer in elected office. Mayor Barber will represent the Waccamaw Regional Council of Governments area.

# NEWS BRIEFS

The South Carolina Municipal Insurance Trust program and the South Carolina Municipal Insurance and Risk Financing Fund boards of trustees recognize members who have reduced their total costs and kept employees safe while delivering better public services. The 2019 Risk Management Services Award winners for SCMIT are the **Town of Elgin, City of Abbeville** and **City of Camden.** The winners for SCMIRF are the **Town of Hemingway, Town of Williamston** and **City of North Augusta.**

Members of the **SC Municipal Finance Officers, Clerks and Treasurers Association** recently elected their 2019 – 2020 board of directors. They are President David Seifert, City of Greer; Vice President Annette Moore, Town of St. George; Secretary/Treasurer Cammie Hayes, City of North Augusta; Directors Amanda Childers, Town of Harleyville; Barbara Denny, City of York; Erika Moore, City of Columbia; Joel Seavey, City of Clemson; and Past President Gregory Saxton, Town of Awendaw.

Members of the **South Carolina Association of Stormwater Managers** recently elected their 2019 – 2020 board of directors. They are President Bonnie Miley, Town of Summerville; Vice President Scottie Ferguson, Pickens County; Secretary/Treasurer Mark Johnson, Town of James Island; Member at Large Lisa Wells, WK Dickson and Company, Inc.; and Immediate Past President Sheri Armstrong, Lexington County.

# Proposed Business License Legislation Explained

Business license taxes are common in South Carolina, with about 234 of the 271 total municipalities levying them on businesses that do business in a city or town. State law leaves each municipality free to set rates based on its needs.

Businesses sometimes complain about the hassle of having to comply with multiple business licensing structures across the state, rather than the cost of the business license itself, since the amount is generally a fraction of 1% of the business' gross income.

In order to simplify business licensing statewide, many South Carolina municipalities that require a business license have adopted standardized practices that greatly streamline the process. These include

- adopting a standard due date of April 30,
- adopting a standard definition of gross income and a standard 12-month period for calculating gross income,
- adopting a standard business license ordinance with uniform class designations to categorize businesses by profitability, and
- being willing to accept a standard business license application form.

## H4431

The 2019 session of the General Assembly saw the introduction of H4431, a business license tax reform bill which remains active for the 2020 session. Instead of simplifying the business licensing process, the bill would complicate it

in several ways. First, the bill changes the basis for calculating the business license tax from gross income to net income. In order to ensure businesses are reporting their net income accurately, cities will have to require them to submit more financial information about themselves than they do currently.

Second, the bill allows businesses to avoid the business license tax depending on how they are structured. The differences between a limited liability partnership and a limited liability corporation may mean one pays the tax while the other does not.

Third, the bill gives preferential treatment to businesses located outside of cities. Out-of-town businesses would be allowed to deduct their first $75,000 of income before paying a business license tax. After that, the out-of-town business would pay no more than $100 in tax.

In-city businesses do not get a deduction or a cap.

Finally, H4431 would further complicate business licensing by adding another

layer of government to the process. The bill would greatly expand state government by handing many critical functions of the business licensing process to the Office of the South Carolina Secretary of State, which currently has no role or experience with administrating the local business license tax.

Local elected officials need to be allowed to make local decisions to meet the needs of their local residents and businesses. That's why cities and towns are voluntarily working toward standardized business license processes that keep the tax fair and simple.

*Learn more about business license taxes and find the standardized business license application, model ordinance and business license handbook at www.masc.sc (keyword: business license). Keep up to date with action on H4431 and other legislation important to cities and towns by reading and subscribing to the* From the Dome to Your Home *report, delivered weekly by email and also available at www.masc.sc (keyword: Dome).*

# Get Ready for the
# 2020 Census

Every decade since 1790, the United States Census has determined the population of each of the nation's communities. The upcoming census will take a count of the U.S. population as of Wednesday, April 1, 2020.

Census data drives a huge number of important decisions for government and the public, and not just the apportionment of legislators and the drawing of district lines. The data helps determine who receives billions of dollars in federal funding each year for everything from transportation to education and healthcare, and it influences businesses deciding where they will locate or expand.

Citing the need to have the best count possible at a time when the state is growing, Gov. Henry McMaster established a statewide Complete Count Committee for the census that includes more than 75 agencies, associations, companies and universities. South Carolina was the 10th fastest-growing state from 2010 to 2018. The 2010 Census counted 4.6 million people living in South Carolina, a number that grew to about 5.1 million by the 2018 estimate.

The official 2020 census numbers are expected to show much change for South Carolina's cities and towns. Some individual municipalities have grown by huge amounts from 2010 to 2018, such as Hardeeville, which grew by about 120%. But the growth is far from uniform. Almost all of the municipalities with populations of more than 10,000 experienced growth while most municipalities with populations of less than 400 saw their populations decrease.

Many county and municipal governments around the state have formed Complete Count Committees to help raise awareness and improve residents' response rates to the Census Bureau's requests for information. Follow-up efforts from the Census Bureau will take place after the April 1 date.

*Local officials can learn more about how to get involved in outreach and where to find Complete Count Committees at www.2020census.gov. A map of hard-to-count census tracts, some with a response rate of less than 60%, is available at www.censushardto countmaps2020.us.*

# Association Highlight:

## Municipal Court Administration Association of SC's "MCAA 101"

Many municipal job positions have specific training and networking needs. The Municipal Association of South Carolina's affiliate associations offer opportunities to meet those needs.

The Municipal Court Administration Association of SC, which promotes the professional and sound administration of courts for cities and towns, now offers "MCAA 101" courses. These courses are designed to provide the staff of municipal courts with the skills critical to their positions.

The training is offered in three sessions taking place in Columbia throughout the year, with no requirement to attend all three. Session A, which will take place February 19 – 20, covers charges, bonds and court basics. Session B, scheduled for June 23 – 24, covers dispositions, records retention, alternative sentencing, reporting and an introduction to court financials. Session C, taking place October 20 – 21, covers court financials.

*Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: MCAA).*

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## MEO Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government

# Testyourselfmonthlyquiz

### *True or False:*

**Minutes from municipal council meetings are public records subject to immediate access without the need for a written Freedom of Information Act request.**

# Answer: *True*

Municipalities and other political subdivisions of the state are public bodies subject to the SC Freedom of Information Act. Meeting minutes of public bodies for the preceding six months must be made available for immediate inspection and copying.

Meeting minutes that have not yet been approved by council must be released, but they should be marked as "draft" minutes.

An individual may make an in-person request for this material during normal business hours without being required to submit the request in writing. This requirement applies to meeting minutes of a municipal council, commission or board of public works, or any committee, subcommittee or advisory committee of the municipality.

*The Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government offers in-person and online courses. "Conducting Public Meetings" is offered as part of Session A of the in-person courses, taking place Wednesday, February 5, 2020, the day after Hometown Legislative Action Day, in Columbia. Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: MEOI).*

*In Uptown Greenwood, influxes of people for major events like the SC Festival of Discovery can reduce the availability of parking. Photo: City of Greenwood.*

Communications

# Preventing the Parking Crunch
## Cities Communicate Parking Solutions for Growing Downtowns

Downtown parking issues are often thought of as a big-city problem: lots of people living in close quarters puts parking at a premium. But for small cities and towns, downtown parking woes may be more an issue of perception than reality.

Several South Carolina municipalities tackled parking concerns by using a variety of tactics to increase the amount of parking spaces available and making sure residents know about it.

The Town of Bluffton watched for decades as nearby Hilton Head Island grew rapidly. In the past 10 years, that growth has spilled over into Bluffton,

bringing with it visitors and more residents — more than 20,000 at last count. The original town, now the Bluffton Historic District, was just 1 square mile.

"Investment in the town's historic district has spurred tourism and economic development, and that has spurred the need for more parking," said Debbie Szpanka, Bluffton's public information officer.

Bluffton has taken a two-pronged approach to deal with its parking issues. First, when the town developed a park or common space, it added parking. A total of 627 new spaces were added during streetscaping.

"For new town projects, we have bought property and used it for open spaces and parking," Szpanka said. "In every town project, we are looking at the parking component."

The second line of attack is to modify people's perceptions. Longer-term residents were used to parking right in front of the businesses they wanted to visit.

"Now, they may have to park a block away," Szpanka said. "So, I pose the question 'Does Bluffton have a parking problem or a walking problem?'"

*A parking lot situated along Bluffton Road is a relatively new addition to Bluffton's Historic District. Photo: Town of Bluffton.*
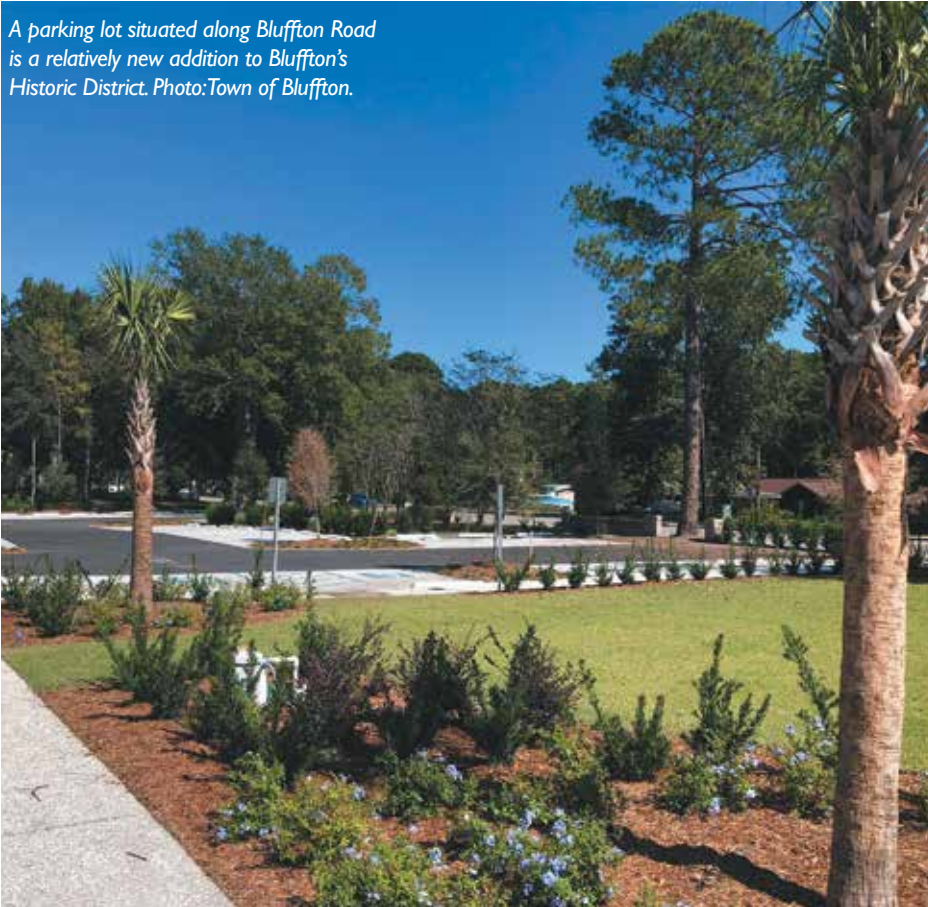


*The recent streetscaping project along Bluffton's Dr. Mellichamp Drive included newly added street parking. Photo: Town of Bluffton.*

*Parking, from page 7 >*

Szpanka said the town includes information about parking when it is telling the public about new developments, and the town's website shows the location of all available parking and the cost.

The City of Florence wanted to know whether its parking issues were perception or reality, so the city paid for a study.

"One of the things that was money well spent was when we hired a consultant to study the parking that we had," said Ray Reich, Florence's recently retired downtown development manager. "You know, sometimes, you can't see the forest for the trees. The consultant looked at it from the perspective of what was a good strategic parking plan to carry the city into the future. Their study reinforced some things we already knew and told us some things we didn't know."

Florence is experiencing a rebirth downtown with additional hotels, restaurants, shops and even residents. While its parking issues were part perception,

the consultant revealed there really was a need for more spaces.

The City of Florence recently completed its first municipal parking deck, which was built in conjunction with an apartment development.



*Martin Family Park, Bluffton's new greenspace addition to Boundary Street, has a parking lot. Photo: Town of Bluffton.*

"For us, it was really a no-brainer," Reich said. "We had been looking at doing a deck, and of course, the problem is Number 1, space and Number 2, cost. About the same time we were looking at building it, we were working with a

developer from Charlotte that wanted to do our first apartment complex downtown."

Reich said he remembered seeing a project known as The Bookends in Greenville where a parking garage was sandwiched between two apartment buildings and suggested the same to his developer. So Florence built the garage and the developer "wrapped" it in apartments. Reich said the city used tax increment financing to create the cash flow to pay off the garage over time.

Creating the 500 garage spaces for downtown parking came with the displacement of 150 surface parking spaces.

"During construction, it is the pain for the gain," Reich said. "During that year of construction was when education was most important."

The city used social media, print advertising and maps to show visitors and residents where parking was available.

"We even put large posters on easels in all the major stores downtown showing

Built in 2016, The Emerson apartments in downtown Florence conceal a publicly available parking deck.



the parking," Reich said. "Now that things have settled out, you still have people complaining there's not a place to park, but it's more they don't want to walk."

The garage provides parking for residents in the apartment complex, downtown shoppers and diners, as well as for events at the nearby performing arts center and the museum.

"When we promote events, we will say that there's plenty of parking in the garage and include a parking map," Reich said. "The good news for residents is it doesn't look like a garage. The bad news is visitors don't realize it's a public garage so we have to have a lot of signage and wayfinding downtown."

The project worked so well, the city is going to do it again.

"We are working on a mixed-use project that will have a hotel, apartment, office complex with a parking garage," Reich said.

In Greenwood, where the historic central business district is known as

Uptown Greenwood, the first major residential development of high-end condominiums also brought some parking issues. Because the project and the city are much smaller, the solution was a little easier than building a parking garage.



The entrance to downtown Florence's parking deck is found a short distance off South Irby Street.

"We created residential parking passes," said Lara Hudson, Uptown Greenwood's manager. "Because it's one thing to want to park close to the business you're going to, but you really do need to park close to your house."

Typically, the city's only parking issues come up during large events. At other times, parking is more of an issue of perception. The city has been blessed, Hudson said, "with a large number of parking spaces right in front of our stores. So when it's not there, people think parking is a problem."

The city also has established two-hour time limits on parking in its commercial district, but some have indicated that the limit was not enough time for customers to complete their business. Hudson pointed to the case of an art studio that hosts classes. The solution there was to provide temporary parking permits for the studio which it could give to students, something that was also done for an event venue where meetings could run for many hours.

Handling individual complaints on a case-by-case basis and coming up with practical solutions, Hudson said, allows for both a business-friendly and customer-friendly environment.

# Keeping Calm With First Amendment Audits

T he city clerk is busily preparing council meeting minutes when an unexpected and confrontational visitor arrives. The person gives no reason for the visit or an identification, but instead demands answers: "What is your name? What is your job here? What's in that room over there?" The person is also recording the encounter with a mobile phone and begins to walk down the hallway into the private office areas.

What should the clerk do?

This situation has occurred more and more across South Carolina and the country. Social media activists, armed with mobile devices and a YouTube channel, have been pushing the boundaries of the First Amendment by entering public buildings, disrupting business and recording reactions. These "First Amendment auditors" are loosely organized, but aggressive; and their primary goal is to provoke a reaction.

## Legal background

In 1991, George Holliday happened to have a video camera on hand to record an unarmed suspect, Rodney King, being violently beaten by the Los Angeles Police Department. The video captured by Holliday has been broadcast globally and seen millions of times.

Today, nearly every person has a video camera at all times in the form of a mobile phone. After high-profile police encounters in New York, Baltimore and Ferguson, Missouri, citizen activists are filming encounters between police and suspects. In this context, the federal

courts have been highly protective of the rights of citizens to film police officers in public places.

It is clearly established that video recording of police encounters is a form of speech protected by the First Amendment. The case of *Fields v. City of Philadelphia* stated that the First Amendment provides the public a "right to record — photograph, film, or audio record — police officers conducting official police activity in public areas."

Although the phenomenon emerged as a way to monitor police activity, First Amendment auditors soon began exploring other possibilities, since the language of the federal cases found a First Amendment right to film "public officials" in "public places." By slightly expanding the original meaning of those words, First Amendment auditors claimed the right to film public employees going about their

business in public buildings. For example, auditors now arrive at government buildings in groups to wander around, filming and interfering with workers and residents.

The First Amendment is not absolute. The Supreme Court has recognized that there are certain places, known as "forums," in which the government can limit speech. The most protected areas are "traditional public forums" such as streets, sidewalks, parks and town squares, where governments may impose only very limited speech regulations. Other areas within public property are known as "nonpublic forums," such as military bases, police and fire stations, public schools, courthouse lobbies and hallways, and the interior of government office buildings. In those, governments may impose significantly more restrictive regulations.

## Practical responses

A First Amendment audit is always uncomfortable and can be disruptive, but there are practical ways to prepare and respond:

- Educate employees. All public-facing employees should have some familiarity with First Amendment audits and how to respond. Although the auditors often exceed their rights under the First Amendment, they do have the right to film public employees in public places.
- Don't overreact. Auditors are trying to provoke a negative reaction that they can post on social media. A video of a public employee responding calmly is not going to result in much traction.

The best defense is simple patience.

- Identify and mark nonpublic forums. In many cases, auditors will try to enter private areas, hallways or offices. The municipality has a right to mark these areas as nonpublic and to impose reasonable regulations on the right to film in them. Nonpublic forums can include any areas into which, under ordinary circumstances, visitors must be invited before entering. Examples include hallways, cubicles, offices and workspaces.
- Consider rules about harassment. Some auditors may engage in conduct that rises to the level of harassment. They may claim they can demand answers or invade the privacy of private residents. In at least one instance in South

Carolina, an individual claiming to be an auditor harassed a female employee by filming her repeatedly and at length. Municipalities can adopt appropriate regulations about such harassment and abusive behaviors.

- Before adopting any specific regulations, a municipality should consult with its attorney. The rules are complex and violations of the First Amendment can result not only in an embarrassing YouTube video but also monetary liability. Again, the most important thing to remember is to keep calm.

*Season 1, episodes 48 and 49 of the* City Quick Connect *podcast discuss First Amendment audits. Learn more www. masc.sc (keyword: City Quick Connect).*

# Subscribe to Stay Connected to the Municipal Association

## Subscriptions available

There are many ways for elected officials and staff and to keep up with the Municipal Association of South Carolina's opportunities and resources.

- *City Connect* **blog** – The blog offers short, timely updates on a variety of municipal issues.
- *From the Dome to Your Home* – This legislative report, sent every Friday during the legislative session, recaps the week's activity on bills affecting cities and towns, suggests actions for local officials and previews the upcoming week.
- *Daily News* – This morning email provides recent news clippings about all aspects of municipal government.
- *The Uplift* – This email, sent every Wednesday to subscribers in place

of the *Daily News*, showcases South Carolina cities and towns at their best.

- *Uptown* **by email** – This monthly email highlights the content also available in the print edition of *Uptown*.
- *Uptown Update* – This weekly email highlights a variety of news, training opportunities, available grants and other time-sensitive information.

## Manage subscriptions

Elected officials and city staff can choose the subscriptions most useful to them by accessing their profile in the Association's database.

- From the Association's website, www. masc.sc, click on the Member Login button in the upper right corner.

- Those without a profile will see directions on the login screen to gain access. Once they are logged into their profile, they can update their title and contact information and provide an email address and social media account names. The Association never sells or shares email addresses.
- From the My Profile section, users can manage subscriptions to all emails.

All elected officials and city staff with certain designated roles automatically receive emails containing the monthly *Uptown*, weekly *Uptown Update* and *From the Dome to Your Home*.

## Let's get social

- Twitter: @MuniAssnSC
- Facebook: MuniAssnSC.StrongSCcities
- Instagram: @strongsccities

# A Day in the Life of a

# *Public Safety PIO*

Municipal public information officers rarely have a 9-to-5 job, but work hours can be even more unpredictable for those responsible for keeping residents informed about public safety and emergency services.

"Law enforcement is a 24-hour, 365-day-a-year job; it's the same for public information officers," said Jennifer Timmons, who has been the public information officer for the Columbia Police Department for the past 8 ½ years.

Like other public information officers, Timmons starts her workday before she even gets out of bed in the morning — checking her phone for texts or emails for information about crimes that may have happened overnight for the first hint of what to expect at work that day. Jump starts are common for PIOs, who know that quick responses go a long way in building trust and sharing necessary information with the press and the public.

*Capt. Jeremiah Lee, public information officer for Summerville Fire and Rescue, speaks on camera. Photo: Town of Summerville.*

Some municipalities have one or two public information officers who handle getting the word out from all departments. Others break out their public safety PIOs for police and fire departments. In Anderson, fire and police have their own PIOs, each with knowledge about their departments and an understanding of what can and can't be made public during incidents. The two departments work together on overlapping crimes, such as arson, and they also work with agencies that may be called in for assistance, such as the State Law Enforcement Division.

Travis Poore is both a firefighter and the designated public information officer for the Anderson Fire Department. He is a captain managing a shift of 19 firefighters who work 24-hour shifts about 10 times per month. Poore also rides the ladder truck that leaves the building for structure fires and wrecks with entrapments. His PIO duties don't take as much of his time, he said, noting that it mostly requires that he always answers the phone and listens to the radio to hear what is happening around the city.

"Any time we have a fire, one of the news organizations will normally call me and try to get more details of what has happened. So most of the time I will either call the incident commander or wait until he sends me the report so I can

read it and then call the media back to give the details that they are looking for," Poore said. "I will also try to get some pictures that some of the firefighters have taken and send them those as well."

Summerville has three public information officers. Mary Edwards is responsible for town government issues such as annexation, roads, parks and finance, while Lt. Shaun Tumbleston handles police public information and Capt. Jeremiah Lee is responsible for public information for the fire department.
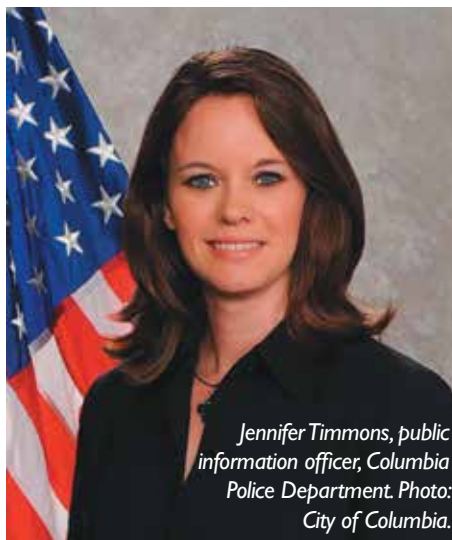
"The fire department and police department are huge divisions, and I believe it's important to have someone dedicated to each to spread the word about all the good our men and women in public safety are doing," Edwards said. "The public needs someone who's knowledgeable in what their municipality is doing with their growth in roads, buildings and economic development. Lt. Tumbleston and Capt. Lee work hard to make sure the public is safe and in the know at times of crisis. My colleagues and I work extremely well together."

At Summerville Fire and Rescue, Lee serves as a fire and life safety educator as well as public information officer. He said he came into the position in July 2019. Before then the PIO functions had gone through Edwards. He went to work pushing out safety-focused communication, and he said that the department, "having a face in the community" through things like prevention outreach, is noticed and appreciated by the public.

For incident response, Lee will put out information through social media as appropriate. He sprinkles those posts with things like fire safety tips, public events notices or information on hydrant flushing. He uses press releases for cases like incidents that cause significant property damage.

"It's good to get ahead of the news media, get something out to them and have that working relationship," he said.

In Columbia, Timmons works closely with Police Chief William "Skip" Holbrook and Deputy Chief Melron Kelly, along with criminal investigators from



*Jennifer Timmons, public information officer, Columbia Police Department. Photo: City of Columbia.*



*Lt. Travis Poore, public information officer, Anderson Fire Department. Photo: City of Anderson.*

various departments. She also meets regularly with the department's marketing manager to discuss upcoming projects.

"Typically, for major crimes, I will receive a phone call from the on-duty watch commander and can respond to a crime scene accordingly to disseminate information to the media and public," she said. "At CPD, we have a 'watch commander' system. That means, a regularly assigned lieutenant will keep the chief, deputy chief, majors and myself aware of major incidents that happen after 5 p.m. That effort helps to keep the flow of information continuing and allows everyone to be on the same page," Timmons said. "Before this system, I was

on call 24 hours a day so the media would call me at all hours of the day for information, whether it was 2 a.m. on a Monday or 6 p.m. on a Sunday. Now, the calls after-hours have diminished. The media still receives valuable information."

Web presence for public safety PIOs can include both monitoring and posting on social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Next Door and department websites.

"Here at CPD, we use the platforms for a variety of reasons and don't just focus on crime," Timmons said. "There needs to be a balanced mix of information to include positive works of police officers, CPD-sponsored events and community-policing initiatives."

Summerville, which has social media accounts for the town overall as well as police and fire, also launched an alert center in August, which allows the public to sign up for emergency and nonemergency alerts about things like road work, traffic, weather, elections, jobs, events, calendar posts and more.

Edwards and Timmons both worked as reporters in television news before moving to their jobs in public information. Timmons spent 11 years as a TV anchor, reporter, producer and editor in Columbia and around the Southeast, while Edwards worked at WPDE in the Florence-Myrtle Beach market for several years.

"I remember what it's like to need to get a script approved by your assignment editor and news director at 4 p.m. to package for air at 5 p.m.," Edwards said. "Reporters want to get their story as accurate as possible, and it's important to keep that good relationship with the media who will help get your message across to the public."

In Anderson, Poore echoed the advice to be responsive to media.

"The advice I would have is to always be nice and try to get the media the information they ask for because they can make you look good or bad on camera," Poore said. "Be mindful of the deadlines they may have in getting the information out and on any media briefings. Be prompt in responding."

Communications

# Be Ready to Communicate in a Crisis

When a city government encounters a crisis, everything happens quickly.

Residents want information and media representatives on the scene want answers. The chaos and the heightened emotions can make the event difficult for municipal staff.

Even so, local elected officials have a number of steps they can take before, during and after a crisis to help everyone stay calm.

## Before the crisis

**Designate a reliable media contact, and make sure all city officials know to refer questions to this person.**

The media contact should be a person who is knowledgeable, well-spoken, accessible, and ideally has regular contact, and therefore some trust, with the media. Even when multiple sources are providing information, ask all media queries to flow through one contact who can ensure all questions are answered accurately and consistently.

Ideally, the contact should not be a police or fire chief who have other critical roles in a disaster. Also, keep alternates in place for when the main media contact is not available.

**Take time to rehearse.**

Problems can grow into emergencies because there was no planning for the possibility of an emergency. Running rehearsals for events like natural disasters or other life-threatening events can help city officials think through issues and see where procedural problems could bubble up.

## Once the crisis begins

**Keep employees aware of what's happening.**

Ideally, city council and staff should receive information before it's released to the media, or at least at the same time. In some cases, city leaders should call a staff meeting or conference call to provide the information which will allow staff to work effectively.

**Give a statement.**

Crises often involve sensitive subjects, especially if they are law enforcement situations. There may be a temptation to avoid being reasonably forthcoming out of a desire to protect victims and investigations. However, in the absence of real information, rumor and speculation can thrive.

The city can position itself as the best source of information by making an honest effort at providing up-to-date information. Consider including background information, a sense of how the city will proceed or investigate, and information on how residents or businesses might be affected by the crisis.

**Do not use comments like "no comment" or "we have no information."**

When officials say "no comment," residents can easily assume the city has something to hide. Going ahead with the information that can be released, even when the whole story isn't available yet, helps to maintain trust. Here are some alternatives to "no comment:"

- "I don't have an answer for that yet. We've just learned of the situation and are working to get more complete information."
- "We're still in the process of bringing the situation under control, so I cannot speculate on the cause of the incident."
- "We're preparing a statement/putting together information on that now. I should have something to give you shortly."

## After the crisis

**Be ready to give updates.**

The story will probably stay alive for a while after the initial crisis has passed. Residents and the media will have questions about long-term effects, the ongoing safety of those involved and any investigations or criminal charges to come out of the event.

**Debrief city staff on communications efforts.**

Was the media contact available and prepared? Is there a better process for handling questions? Were the channels of communication with the public adequate? Talking about these issues honestly and working on areas of needed improvement will improve the city's response to the next crisis.

# After-Hours Social Media Responsiveness

Social media offers cities and towns the attraction of easy, instantaneous communication with constituents. But that connection goes both ways. Residents can use social media channels to bring questions and concerns to their local governments, often after hours and on weekends. Consequently, many local government social media communicators are still figuring out how to effectively plan and allocate staff resources to best handle the demands of social media on staff time and attention.

CJ Tamasco is the senior social media strategist for the University of South Carolina, which has a vast and multifaceted social media presence that unfolds across platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In describing the purpose of the university's social media effort, she noted that it increasingly requires more than just a focus on reach or impressions — it needs engagement with the audiences too. When engagement — people responding to or interacting with posts — is not happening, she said, the social media platforms will reduce the likelihood that future posts from the university will be seen by social media users.

"That requires that we are online when they are online," Tamasco said, adding that those times are "often not between 8:30 and 5."

Tamasco said audiences often set expectations about responsiveness in accordance with their motivation for reaching out. Someone reaching out with a specific customer service issue, for example, would be looking for a faster response than someone who is simply looking to vent about a problem. Explaining how the difference in a person's motivations could work in municipal government, she said someone making contact about a water system emergency would be looking for a very fast response, while someone sending a message about the condition of a park restroom would likely be satisfied with an email response the next day.

The university's social media team is set up for monitoring and responding to readers as appropriate on weekends and holidays, something which is often not possible or easy for small organizations. Tamasco pointed to the need for establishing time when the person primarily responsible for social accounts is allowed to "unplug" from them and for that person to be willing to unplug.

"I take 'unplugging' very seriously," she said. "It's not checking in just to see what's up. It's not checking in because I'm curious. It's the discipline required when this is part of your everyday life."

Tamasco also cautioned against the temptation to make social media something that staff members can simply handle in their free time.

"I can't say enough about the importance of resourcing appropriately," she said. "If social media is a stake that someone wants to put in the ground, whether you're a tiny organization, a midlevel organization, or an organization the size of [the University of] South Carolina, the resources have to be there, or the results will not."

## Social media responsiveness by the numbers

- The average response time for companies on Facebook is about 28 hours, but 85% of customers on Facebook expect a response in six hours *(Source: Hubspot).*

- The average response time for companies on Twitter is about 31 hours, but 64% of customers on Twitter expect a response within one hour *(Source: Hubspot).*

- Only 20.8% of U.S. internet users say that social media is the best channel for customer service, but 69% of U.S. residents say that messaging a company directly on social media makes them feel more confident about that brand *(Source: Hootsuite).*

# Calendar

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

## JANUARY

**29 Main Street South Carolina First Quarter Training.** Camden, SC. Topics include the Main Street Four-Point Approach, tax credit perspectives from local experts and abandoned buildings.

## FEBRUARY

**4 Hometown Legislative Action Day.** Columbia Marriott (see cover article).

**5 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government Session A and B, Advanced Institute and Advanced Continuing Education.** Columbia Marriott. Topics for Session A include an overview of local government planning and zoning; conducting public meetings; and strategic planning. Topics for Session B include municipal annexation; business license tax administration; and ethics and public accountability. Advanced Institute Courses are "Advanced Budgeting and Finance" and "Advanced Leadership and Governance." Advanced Continuing Education topics include a more in-depth overview municipal elections and harassment prevention.

**19 – 20 Municipal Court Administration Association 101 – Session A**. Municipal Association of SC, Columbia. Topics include an introduction to court administration, charges, bonds and court basics.

**20 SC Association of Municipal Power Systems Associate Member Lunch.** Seawell's, Columbia.

**25 Main Street South Carolina New Director Orientation.** Municipal Association of SC, Columbia.

**26 – 28 Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Institute – Year 2, Session A.** Hyatt Place Columbia/Downtown/The Vista. Topics include technology in the workplace, interpersonal skills, payroll administration, risk management, time management, grants administration, notary public and roundtable sessions.

## MARCH

**5 SC Association of Stormwater Managers First Quarter Meeting.** Seawell's, Columbia. Topics include stormwater legal issues, a DHEC update and advocating for stormwater programs.

**11 SC Business Licensing Officials Association Spring Training Institute and Advanced Academy.** Seawell's, Columbia. Topics include a "What would you do?" session of case studies.

**16 – 18 SC Utility Billing Association Annual Meeting.** Beach House Resort, Hilton Head Island. Topics include First Amendment audits, violence in the workplace and ethics.

**24 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government: Basic Budgeting and Municipal Finance.** Regional councils of governments locations and the Municipal Association of SC.