



# *Cities Mean* **BUSINESS**

A PUBLICATION OF THE MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA

ISSUE 1 | 2021

## *Adapting to Change*

**Cities Find Creative Ways to Handle Pandemic**

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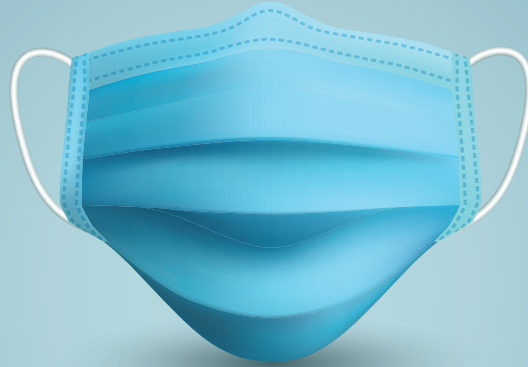
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By Megan Sexton

### Cover Photo:

Greenville city staff wear masks at the TD Saturday Market on Main Street. Photo: City of Greenville - Department of Events and Cultural Affairs.



## Cities Mean BUSINESS

A publication of Municipal Association of South Carolina

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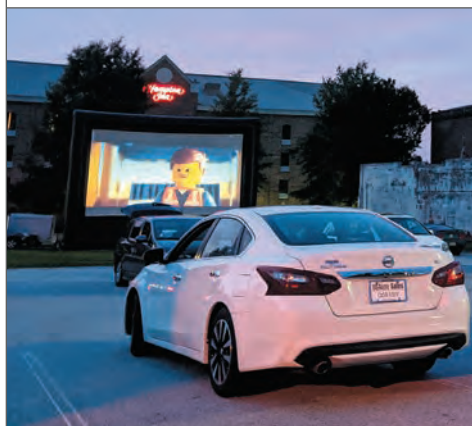
Published by

SC BIZ  NEWS

www.scbiznews.com

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## Letter From the **DIRECTOR**



**Todd Glover**  
*Executive Director,  
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Association of SC*

**The coronavirus pandemic has introduced all of us to new ways of doing things** — new ways of conducting business, meeting each other and even celebrating. South Carolina's city and town governments have demonstrated leadership through many of these adjustments, from managing local mask ordinances to pushing for business relief efforts and keeping public discourse alive at socially distant city council meetings.

This issue of *Cities Mean Business* focuses on the ongoing work of local governments to maintain vital services and minimize disruptions during the pandemic.

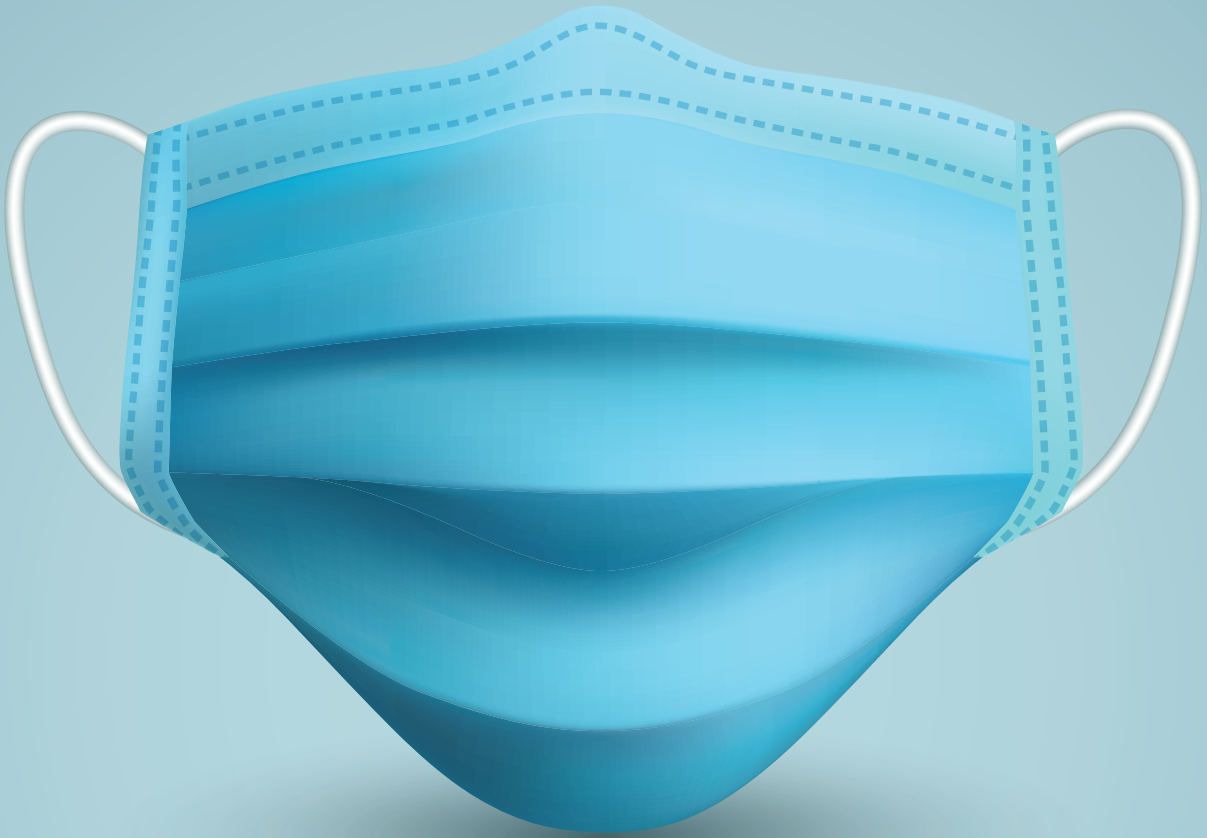
One of the articles takes a look at how cities have met the challenge of communicating with residents and businesses about their ordinances requiring face masks — a precaution which experts tell us has been an impactful tool in the fight against the coronavirus. Another story highlights the creative ways that city governments have found to continue offering the arts and culture opportunities that help make their host communities an attractive place to live. This story examines the rebirth of drive-in movies in Newberry, special events without large crowds in Walhalla and even virtual museum exhibits in Seneca.

Long before the pandemic, cities and towns were already expanding digital services such as online permitting and payment systems. A story in this issue shows how these efforts at streamlining transactions are benefiting local businesses and will continue to do so. The final story looks at how city e-newsletters have provided an effective way of communicating with stakeholders in Greenwood, Mauldin and Beaufort.

South Carolina's municipalities have played a critical role in this pandemic, working to keep residents as safe as possible and businesses supported. They have remained resourceful and creative throughout, and their labors will remain important to the state's recovery efforts.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "B. Todd Glover". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "B" and "G".

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# AMPLIFYING THE MASK MESSAGE

*By Megan Sexton*

**A**s cities and towns passed face mask ordinances last summer to combat COVID-19, some turned to marketing and communications departments to help spread the message of the importance of wearing masks to a sometimes skeptical public.

Communication campaigns popped up in municipalities statewide — from large banners erected in downtowns to Instagram posts with local businesses and neighbors pledging to wear face coverings.

The Florence Forward Pledge program, for example, started after the city adopted an emergency face covering ordinance, requiring face coverings to be worn when people enter a business that is open to the public. The program sought to encourage businesses



Greenville Mayor Knox White stands with one of the images created for the “Mask Up. Life is Waiting.” campaign. Photo: City of Greenville.



Dr. Wendell James speaks at a Greenville press conference. Photo: City of Greenville.

to commit to the safety of their employees and the public by following state and federal safety guidelines, said Hannah Davis, development manager for the City of Florence.

Each participating business received information to help keep employees and customers safe, and a door decal to remind patrons that the business was following COVID-19 safety protocols, she said.

“The 30,000-foot answer [for why the campaign was important] is that we have got to show a united front, especially with a pandemic that’s been so politicized. It’s important that we put out the facts, put out why it’s important to our community and amplify the message in a consistent way,” Davis said.

Some cities, including Florence, modeled their pledges and campaigns after Greenville, the first municipality in the state to enact a face covering ordinance. After passage, Greenville quickly pushed out its “Mask Up. Life is Waiting.” campaign, which drew on locals to explain the importance of masks to slow the spread of the virus and allow life to return to normal, said Beth Brotherton,

director of communications and neighborhood relations in Greenville.

The campaign was announced by Mayor Knox White at one of the city’s media briefings with local physicians.

“We chose local, recognizable people — a mom blogger, a high school football star, a popular restaurant owner — and chose taglines that we hoped people would connect with. ‘I wear a mask because ... we all miss school.’ ‘I wear a mask because ... fall isn’t the same without football,’” Brotherton said.

The campaign ran at a time when schools had not yet decided on their attendance and athletic plans.

“We also included a small business owner so citizens could recognize that another closure or stay-at-home order could be devastating to entrepreneurs who were barely hanging on to their livelihoods,” Brotherton said. “We used a bride-to-be because it seemed like everywhere you looked on social media people were talking about delaying weddings, hosting them on Facebook live or limiting guests to only immediate family. The tagline was ‘I wear a mask because

... I’ve dreamed of this day my whole life.’ We didn’t want to be heavy-handed. We just wanted people to think about the impacts.”

To make the campaign visible, Greenville erected 5-foot-by-7-foot A-frame signs around downtown, along with smaller signs at entrances to local attractions. They also added streetlight banners.

“The campaign certainly got a good response on social media,” Brotherton said. “Lots of people took selfies with the posters downtown. It was fun to see how people did really connect with the message. I think the campaign, combined with the ordinance, did exactly what we hoped it would do. It made mask wearing more ‘acceptable’ and less ‘weird.’”

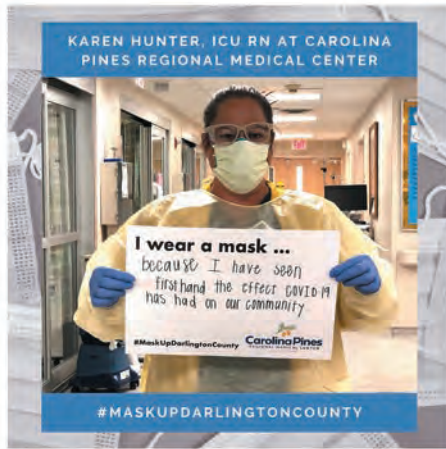
The face-covering campaigns around the state also drove home the importance of municipalities working with other area organizations to broaden a city’s reach.

In Hartsville, which also had a mask ordinance, the city worked with Darlington County, the school district and Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center on the “Mask Up Darlington County” initiative. The collaboration began while the Darlington County School District was discussing back-to-school plans.

“All organizations wanted to make one large — and loud — push to encourage residents to mask up in order for COVID-19 numbers to decrease, therefore meaning students could return back to the classrooms,” said Lauren Baker, Hartsville’s director of tourism and communications.

Communications representatives from each organization met to create a consistent, branded campaign to show they were all on the same page. They used the same signs, but changed out the organizations’ logos.

“We allowed the individuals to write their own personal reasons for wearing a mask. These real-life reasons and scenarios allowed the campaign to hit home for people on different levels. These photos and videos were



The “Mask Up Darlington County” effort was a partnership between Darlington County, the City of Hartsville, Carolina Pines Regional Medical Center and the Darlington County School District. Photo: City of Hartsville.

then dropped into one template and posted across all organizations’ social media pages,” Baker said.

According to analyses by the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, cities with mask ordinances saw COVID-19 numbers drop during the campaigns. Looking ahead, cities say they have learned lessons from the successes and missed opportunities of the mask wearing campaigns they can build on in the future.

“The biggest lesson I learned, as a communications department of one, is the strength in collaboration,” Baker said. “While I was responsible for the scheduling, branding and posting, it was great to have other organizations feeding me a diverse group of content. This allowed the campaign to have a greater impact in the community as a whole, not just in the direct city that we serve.”

Davis said Florence was actually a few months behind with implementing its program, and an earlier start may have generated more participation than the 36 businesses that had opted in by early November.

“We need to find a more effective and efficient way to get the word out about future participation-oriented programs and convert interested parties to real users of the programs. On the plus side, we found a whole new set of skills within our staff to create these user-generated platforms utilizing GIS.

In the future, we plan to implement this type of opt-in program should the need arise. We see it potentially being very useful for documenting calls for service, or hurricane response,” Davis said.

In Greenville, Brotherton said the success of the city’s efforts reminded her that public health marketing campaigns must be simple, real, personal and not “boring.”

“Numbers and data are important and can certainly help you tell the story, but at the end of the day it’s about showing people why they should give a darn. Answering the question, ‘Why should I care?’ In this case you should care not only because you have elderly parents who have been unable

to see their grandkids, or people with preexisting medical conditions who are at severe risk of complications or death if exposed, but because we desire the more everyday things of going to a ballgame, eating at our favorite restaurant and being able to go to school to see friends,” Brotherton said.

Greenville is now taking lessons learned from the public health campaign to launch new campaigns. Brotherton said when her office got an assignment for a tree preservation campaign, she was told, “We were thinking something like the ‘mask up’ campaign.’ So, I’m thinking you’ll see a lot more photos of real people in relatable situations coming from the City of Greenville.” ●



A Florence Forward Pledge decal hangs in a business window. Photo: City of Florence.

# OFFERING SERVICES ONLINE HELPS CITIES AND RESIDENTS

By Megan Sexton

**M**any cities around the state were offering permitting and payment systems online even before COVID-19 hit — a move officials and staff were thankful for when the pandemic disrupted life and closed offices last spring. Other municipalities moved quickly to set up procedures to help companies submit building permits or residents pay their water bills without visiting city offices.

In North Myrtle Beach, the building permitting system entered the virtual world in September 2019. Builders and property owners go online to submit plans, communicate with city staff members, apply for an inspection, view the inspection results, turn in any necessary forms and print a certificate of completion at the end of the process.

At one time, the city had not allowed customers to make payments online, “but once COVID came, we flipped that switch and allowed people to do everything online,” said Suzanne Pritchard, the senior planner and urban designer with the City of North Myrtle Beach.

When North Charleston moved into its new city hall in 2009, the facility became a one-stop shop for permitting. Residents could move from office to office to submit, review and pay fees at various departments within the same building.

“Now we’ve taken our permitting approach one step further and made it all virtual,” said Ryan Johnson, North Charleston’s public relations and economic development coordinator.



Courtney Heyward of the North Charleston Executive Department attends to residents’ needs using the city’s online Citizen Support Center. Photo: City of North Charleston.

“As I always tell people, our job is to make sure our buildings are safe and adhere to codes because we want them open as quickly as possible,” he said. “We want parks open and sidewalks fixed and potholes filled and everything else to run smoothly and grow and improve. Especially considering we’re facing a shortfall in revenue this year because of COVID-19, which is not easy by any stretch of the imagination.”

He said moving services to a digital platform has helped the staff, residents and businesses.

“It’s convenient because people are able to submit all their plans at one location and it goes to everyone all at the same time to be reviewed, so it speeds up the process.

Especially in our building, planning, fire inspections and our stormwater inspections in public works,” Johnson said.

All of the city’s registration and payments for athletics, recreational activities and court costs also are online.

City leaders stress that if customers don’t have access to the internet, paper applications are still accepted. Some municipalities have kiosks for payments or internet access available in city buildings.

Pritchard said North Myrtle Beach’s decision to move to new permitting software began with a general upgrade of the city’s outdated system.

“We wanted to bring more accessibility to everyone. We didn’t envision the COVID



future during this whole process, where city hall would be closed. We wanted people to be able to come in and talk, but it was also important to have that ability [to work with] people who couldn't get down here," Pritchard said.

The reaction at first was mixed. Developers and builders accustomed to doing large volumes of permits had to change their workflow. Once they realized that someone didn't have to come to city hall for each permit and wait until the process was complete, they appreciated the easier, more efficient process, according to Pritchard.

It also was important for North Myrtle Beach to be able to customize its software to fit its needs, and be able to change the online forms or substitute questions quickly.

"We had a lot of staff time learning the system and being able to create the forms and use the forms, but we now can make changes on the fly when something happens like we close city hall."

Choosing and customizing its software also allowed North Myrtle Beach to look strategically at its whole process of issuing permits — something Pritchard recommends for other cities looking to transition to online permitting.

"Really figure out what you want. If you were building the perfect building permit process, what would that be? What are the important parts that were being missed? How can we better coordinate with departments like public works and finance?"

The North Myrtle Beach system is not limited to file uploads and it works for more than building permits. For example, the city realized it could use the same system to develop a plat review process, so residents and developers can submit plats online to the planning department for review.

"Because it's a citywide license, we can use it for any form that needs to be reviewed.

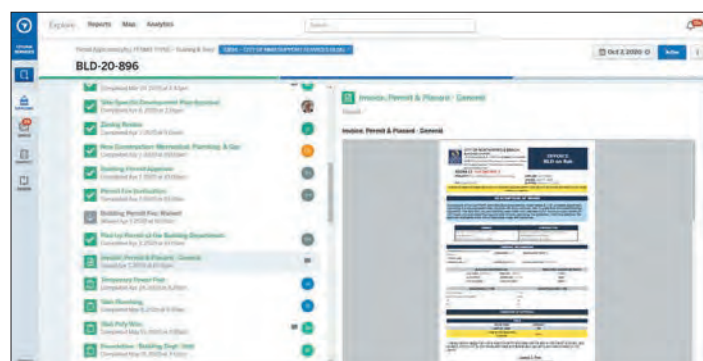


York City Hall offers a bill payment kiosk in its lobby. Photo: City of York.

There are no limits on files, so that's awesome," said Pritchard.

Cities also offer multiple ways to pay for services like utilities or court fines, including in-person, online and through night drop boxes. The City of York offers those options along with a kiosk in the city hall lobby where customers can pay bills.

"The night drop box has been very convenient for those who work outside the city. It is a safe, secure, locked safe where they can drop their payments off," said Barbara Denny, York's finance director. "Offering to accept their payments over the phone is something we added with the closing of our lobby due to COVID."



North Myrtle Beach allows builders and property owners to handle necessary paperwork online through its building permitting system. Photo: City of North Myrtle Beach.

Allowing online payments offers a quicker and safer way to provide payment than through the mail system, Denny said.

"It was difficult in the beginning as the system we use requires you to put in the account number along with the service address. As residents learned the system, they commented how it is great to be able to pay at any time of day or night. It also offers them to set up an account, with their own password, so they can conveniently pay quickly each month," she said.

She said adding the ability to process payments online has reduced in-house payment and foot traffic by 40% to 50%, opening up staff time to work on other projects.

"One of the things I like best with the online system is that when there is an issue with a payment, I can log in and search quickly to find the payment and explain to the customer why it was rejected. This saves time," Denny said.

As technology improves and options grow, cities can implement changes that make conducting business more convenient and economical.

Advice from Johnson in North Charleston for those cities looking at moving more of their services online?

"Just do it. Government lags behind private industry, but eventually we get there. We started streaming city council meetings in 2011. Now everybody is doing it. By using the technology that's out there, we make things more open and transparent," he said. ●



# E-NEWSLETTERS

## Put Information 'All in One Place'

By Page Ivey

Cities and towns have many ways to communicate with residents: direct mail, websites and social media.

E-newsletters also provide a low-cost way for cities to reach out and help residents know what's going on.

Often powered by email marketing platforms like Constant Contact or Mailchimp, e-newsletters give subscribers the big municipal headlines before sending them to a city website or other digital locations for more information. In many cases, newsletters started small, but some cities are now using them as robust ways to engage residents and help foster a more vibrant community.

### Uptown Greenwood

Uptown Greenwood, the city's central business district organization, provides a digital newsletter called *Uptown Lowdown*. Uptown Greenwood works with the city on the product, which includes information on the Uptown farmers market and splash pad. The monthly newsletter, which has been produced for about four years and has 8,000



subscribers, focuses on upcoming events, especially Greenwood's two major annual celebrations, the Festival of Flowers and the Festival of Discovery. It also contains write-ups on news and events and encourages readers to learn more from the Uptown Greenwood website or a social media channel.

"There's always things going on here," said Uptown Greenwood Manager Lara Hudson. "Whether it's maintenance or if there's a private event, just information that the community would need to know about accessing the farmers market and when they can come to the splash pad."

Sometimes Hudson will send out information between editions of *Uptown Lowdown* if something important comes up or the details of an event change.

"We spend most of our time on our website. That's where we're putting all of our information and that makes putting the newsletter together easier," Hudson said. "Our Facebook page definitely gets more engagement if we link to it from our newsletter."

Hudson said that information has become even more critical during the coronavirus pandemic.

"The splash pad is a very popular activity in Uptown for families, especially now with everything going on," Hudson said. "I think residents are appreciative of the communication we give them because they're hungry for something to do right now."

Subscribers to the newsletter have to opt in, meaning they must request specifically to receive the emails. Finding new subscribers has not been easy this year, with many of the events that ordinarily make people want to sign up for the newsletter not happening.

The city, with the help of its technology team, is trying something a little different.

“You used to just click on the [free Up-town] WiFi and were automatically connected. Now you have to put in an email address, accept terms and then you have the option to receive our newsletter,” Hudson said.



**Mauldin**

The City of Mauldin’s community development department handles everything from business recruitment and long-term infrastructure planning to the Mauldin Cultural Center. When Van Broad, director of community development, started, the city didn’t have direct marketing communication with its residents and relied on an outside firm to provide the occasional news release.

“If you think about it, somebody is going to tell your story,” Broad said. “Either you can tell it or let someone else tell it.”

Part of the funding for the community development office’s marketing efforts comes from accommodations taxes, and helps cover the cost of material Broad’s team mails, and for the staff that produces and promotes the information digitally.

Broad described the earliest newsletters from 2016 as “very generic.”

“Then [Cultural Affairs Manager] Keira [Heider] came on board, and she created an incredible template and really made an

honest newsletter. It had information, it had factual reports, it had demographics information, it had stories about the community. She just took it to another level. It could be its own newspaper for the city.”

The *Mauldin Report*, covering everything from public works to cultural affairs, is mailed, distributed in city offices and posted on the city’s website. It is also promoted in a monthly e-blast and on social media.

“Every department has something going on,” said Heider. “It’s basically how do residents engage with their city and know what’s happening in their city from council meetings to when you just want something to do.”

For the Cultural Center, the team prints an annual season preview, including shows, festival and educational opportunities, that is mailed to 25,000 homes in Mauldin. Individual events are promoted in weekly emails to subscribers.

The city’s eblast goes to more than 2,600 subscribers while the Cultural Center has more than 4,200 subscribers. Heider said there is also a mailing list of folks who want to know about volunteer opportunities, and the city’s recreation department plans to start an e-blast very soon.

“Residents can easily access information they do want but are not bombarded with information they don’t want,” Heider said.

As the effort has grown, so has the team’s staffing, which includes marketing and design coordinator Jeannie Harmon.



**Beaufort**

The City of Beaufort’s e-newsletter is the responsibility of Kathleen Williams, who

became the city’s first dedicated communications person in December 2019.

Williams said the biggest asset of the newsletter is to consolidate city information in one place that people may have missed on social media posts or as news releases on the website.

“I do think newsletters can be effective in terms of putting it all in one place in a way that social media, which tends to be a little more scattered, can’t really offer,” Williams says. “It reinforces news that’s come out in the past month that is still timely and alerts people to anything upcoming.”

“For the pandemic, it’s been an incredibly important tool for sharing information.”

Williams has included information on city office closings, how the public can do business with the city when offices are closed and information on the pandemic from the Centers for Disease Control and the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control. She even included a feature on how to make a mask as she was letting residents know about the city ordinance requiring them to wear one.

The city’s mask ordinance provided a great example, she said, of how information flows from the city. First, Williams posted a news release to the city’s website with information about the ordinance. She produced several social media posts announcing the ordinance and linking to the website. In the next monthly newsletter, she reminded residents of the ordinance and thanked them for following it. The newsletter was sent to her 3,500 subscribers and it was posted on both the website and social media.

Williams recommends that any town looking to start or improve an existing newsletter should look for a staffer who can be dedicated to creating the newsletter, even if that’s not their whole job. She also suggests hiring someone with a news or marketing background. ●

# Finding Socially Distant Workarounds for Arts and Culture

By Page Ivey



**T**he coronavirus pandemic hit just as cities and towns were gearing up for spring festivals and summer arts and cultural events. Event restrictions meant that many programs and events aimed at giving families local entertainment or education options were in danger.

In South Carolina, the cancellations have led to some creative workarounds, creating new ways to celebrate culture and community and offer family-friendly activities.

In Newberry, the summer tradition of free outdoor movies transitioned into a cultural throwback, as the city created a pop-up drive-in theater experience. The city set up a 40-foot blowup screen in a city parking lot and used an FM transmitter to allow attendees to listen to the film using their car stereos rather than over loudspeakers.

Mary Alex Kopp, Newberry's tourism and events manager, said the drive-in setup accommodates about 50 cars. Assuming

four people per car, that would total 200 attendees — a little less than the event's usual crowds when people brought chairs and blankets to sit together under the stars.

Drive-in movie theaters have faded so much from their heyday that most attendees had never been to one, leading to unfamiliarity with the process. Kopp and her team made a short video explaining drive-in rules and etiquette, while also explaining why people couldn't bring their golf carts

— state law prohibits driving golf carts on roads after dark. They also explained why pandemic restrictions meant that families needed to stay in their cars.

In the fall, Oktoberfest serves as one of the most important events on Newberry's cultural calendar. The city's largest outdoor festival features arts and food vendors to help celebrate the town's German heritage. Rather than cancel it, the city decided to move the entire event online.

The virtual festival ran for two weeks and included about 30 artisans and craftspeople selling their goods in a virtual vendor fair. Restaurants offered takeout "taste of Oktoberfest" menus and recipes for traditional German dishes that could be made at home. The event also featured lots of at-home activities for kids as well as contests with prizes.

"There is an authenticity to the celebration because of the heritage of the area," Kopp said. "Many people treat it like a homecoming when they come back to visit family and friends. It's sad that we can't do it

in the same sense that we always do, but it's nice to try to give them something."

The City of Walhalla did not host its annual Oktoberfest this year, but it has worked to give residents and visitors some ongoing arts and culture opportunities. During the pandemic, Walhalla's small size has worked to its advantage, said Libby Imbody, director of Main Street Walhalla.

"If we have an event and the maximum size we can have is 250 people — that's a good-sized event for us," Imbody said.

Instead of larger outdoor events with vendors and activities all packed together on Walhalla's traditional Main Street, Imbody helped create several smaller events with venues spread farther apart.

"Being able to host smaller events to get a couple of vendors out there helps that community that has really had their livelihood taken away by COVID," Imbody said.

"These artists, these makers, are also local small businesses. We need to help out that



*Libby Imbody distributes activity kits for the "Summer Nights on Short Street." Photo: City of Walhalla.*

**The City of Newberry transitioned its free outdoor movie series into a drive-in theater in a parking lot. Photo: City of Newberry.**



maker community that has lost a ton of work because there are no events.”

One event, the “Dog Days of Summer,” focused on bakers and craftspeople who make things for pets.

“People came with their dogs throughout the day,” Imbody said. “It was not a huge crowd, but it just kind of keeps it going and keeps Walhalla on people’s minds.”

The town waived its vendor fee at its farmers market and extended the dates through September.

Walhalla also turned its kid-centric “Summer Nights on Short Street,” which usually takes place inside museums, into take-home activity kits that parents could pick up and use at home with their children. Families signed up on Facebook for the event then drove by and picked up the activity kits in advance of the weekend.

“Parents could come by and get their stuff, like coloring sheets, different activities, recipes, instructions for games, YouTube and Spotify playlists for each event,” Imbody said. “It was a crash-course, last-minute thing, but we had great sponsors for that.”

The smaller, more frequent events have been a hit with residents and local businesses.

“We want to take this idea of these smaller events and carry it on post-COVID,”

Imbody said. “Our merchants have been happy with it. They say, ‘Let’s do it every weekend.’ ”

For one city, the response to the pandemic’s effect on arts and culture was something they could accommodate all along with a virtual museum. Now, the alternative to museum visits they created has actually increased their “visitors.”

The Bertha Lee Strickland Cultural Museum and the Lunney Museum in Seneca tell the stories of the African American experience as well as the story of one of the town’s prominent white families in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries — the Lunneys.

The directors of the two museums, Shelby Henderson and Nick McKinney, work together to create exhibits that tell these stories. When the pandemic hit, they worked quickly to put their limited resources into exhibits online.

“One of the advantages or disadvantages of a small museum is that because you have limited staff, it’s a lot easier to pivot,” said McKinney, who added that his role is to help convert Henderson’s vision into reality — even when it’s virtual.

“When you’re a larger institution, it takes longer to turn and try to get something new out because so many people and different

moving parts are operating,” he said. “Trust me, we would love to have more moving parts, but in some ways, it has its advantages, and this is one of those ways. We can say, ‘Our new focus is this, how do we make it happen?’ ”

The result is a collection of virtual exhibits hosted on the museums’ own websites, found at [www.blsbcm.org](http://www.blsbcm.org) and [www.lunneymuseum.org](http://www.lunneymuseum.org).

These virtual exhibits have shown how a socially distant option can create new opportunities, even during the pandemic, since they have drawn more visitors than the museums themselves drew when they were open. More importantly for Henderson, the exhibits are getting visitors who are coming back multiple times.

“A huge parameter for me was people clicking on it a second time, a third time,” said Henderson, who helped the Bertha Lee Strickland museum get started four years ago. “We are close to triple what our visitation would be in person if we had been open.”

The pandemic has limited the way cities and towns have been able to host in-person gatherings. Even so, creative changes made by local leaders have allowed for new ways to involve residents and businesses in their communities. ●



The Bertha Lee Strickland Cultural Museum offers virtual versions of its exhibits online. Photos: City of Seneca.

# HOMETOWN SNAPSHOT



In 2017, the City of Camden won a Community Challenge grant from the AARP Livable Communities initiative that enabled it to transform a long, poorly lit alleyway into an inviting space featuring lighting, seating and planters. The alleyway, which also serves as a connection point for Camden's Town Green, has since then been the site of public art projects and even dance events.

*Photo: City of Camden.*

# You see a ballpark...



**We see an investment in hometown quality of life** that offers a special place to host national tournaments and welcome visitors. This is the same special place where kids of all ages can enjoy sports and outdoor activities with neighbors and friends.

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