

From the Desk of the Executive Director



Fern Showed Us the Best of Our Cities

Just a few weeks ago, we were all bracing for what forecasters warned could be one of the season's most severe winter storms.

Kids crossed their fingers for snow days off from school, while plenty of adults quietly hoped the meteorologists would get it wrong. But then Winter Storm Fern arrived.

What began as a beautiful snowfall quickly transformed into a brutal ice storm. Early that Sunday morning, as I got up, the power flickered and then went out completely. It stayed that way in our neighborhood for four long days. And we were the fortunate ones.

Friends of mine didn't see their lights—or heat—return for ten days. Even cell service and internet access failed at times. As if being completely off the grid weren't enough, single-digit temperatures made an already difficult situation even more dangerous.

Through it all, we were never truly on our own. Line workers, water crews, and road and street teams mobilized immediately; many of them still working even as

you read this.

Our police officers and firefighters rose to the moment as well, answering calls for help in conditions where most of us could barely walk, let alone drive.

What we witnessed across our cities was nothing short of remarkable. Neighbors helping neighbors. Strangers stepping in for strangers. Communities supporting one another from one end of Tennessee to the other. Time and again, I'm struck by how the worst circumstances have a way of revealing the very best in everyday people.

Our deepest thanks to every municipal employee who helped carry our communities through Winter Storm Fern.

No matter your role, your dedication made all the difference, and we are profoundly grateful.

Anthony Haynes
TML Executive Director

Municipalities deal with water, power outages after Winter Storm Fern strikes



Public works officials in Bristol work to salt roads and sidewalks prior to the snowfall from Winter Storm Fern. (Photo by Bristol)

By KATE COIL

State officials confirmed 31 weather-related deaths amid Winter Storm Fern, leading to a statewide emergency declaration.

Officials with the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) said one death in each Cheatham, Dyer, Hancock, Haywood, and Johnson counties; two deaths each in Fayette, Hardin, Hawkins, Henderson, Hickman, and Obion counties; three in Knox County; five in Davidson County; and six deaths in Shelby County.

Gov. Bill Lee declared a statewide state of emergency on Jan. 22, with President Donald Trump granting the emergency declaration on Jan. 24. The federal government expedited \$11 million in relief funds to be shared among Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana. President Trump later approved an additional \$60.6 million for the state of Tennessee but limited to 23 counties. Gov. Lee indicated more counties would be added to the request pending assessment.

Funding will be available for the state and eligible local governments and certain nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for emergency work and the repair or replacement of facilities in Cheatham, Chester, Clay, Davidson, Hardin, Henderson, Hickman, Lewis, McNairy, Perry, Sumner, Trousdale, Wayne, and Williamson counties. Funds for emergency protective measures will be made available to Decatur, Dickson, Hardeman, Lawrence, Maury, Robertson, Rutherford, and Wilson counties.

TEMA officials said they are "actively coordinating with local counties to assess and document damages to determine whether impacts meet the federal criteria necessary to request this type of assistance through a Major Disaster Declaration."

As power outages continued to plague residents, Gov. Bill Lee also signed Executive Order 111 granting Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) crews the ability to clear non-state roads and help local line workers restore power more quickly.

To help with increased call volumes for missing persons and welfare checks in the wake of the storm, Metro Nashville encouraged residents to submit requests online to avoid straining 911 communications, while Tennesseans outside of Nashville were encouraged to contact a special hotline set up by TBI. TEMA also created a Tennessee Disaster Information Line to provide resources to those needing guidance and resources as issues like power outages and slick conditions remained.

At its peak, more than 309,000 customers across the state were without power with the greatest impacts being 204,500 outages in and around Nashville. Tennessee ranked as the state with the highest number of power outages because of the storm.

TVA reported the bulk power system remained stable but icing caused extensive damage to local distribution centers, requiring local power companies and linemen to work around the clock to restore service.

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Lee delivers eighth State of the State



Gov. Bill Lee delivers his eighth and final State of the State address before a joint session of the Tennessee General Assembly. Lee detailed plans for a \$57.9 million state budget. (Photo by TN GOP)

By KATE COIL
TT&C Assistant Editor

Gov. Bill Lee delivered his eighth and final [State of the State Address](#) on Feb. 2 before the Tennessee General Assembly, highlighting priorities including expanding the school voucher program, crime in Memphis, and nuclear investment, amid pledges to also cut the state budget.

Titled "Tennessee: The Original Frontier," Lee began the speech recognizing the lives lost and continued power outages experienced due to Winter Storm Fern. He also reflected on his time as governor as it comes to a close.

"In 2019, when I walked through those doors into this chamber for the very first time, I had great excitement for what we, together, could and would deliver for the people of Tennessee," Lee said. "With seven years under our belt and the gray hair to show for it, we have delivered, but I could never have predicted the journey we would embark upon together. I now know that it's impossible to fully appreciate the value of a relationship between a governor and a general assembly until you're submerged in the deep end together, solving serious problems and yes, sometimes wrestling it out, but always looking for opportunities

to make life better for the seven million people we serve."

Lee also mentioned Tennessee's role in 250 years of American history and a desire for the state to continue its reputation for forging new frontiers. He cited education as one of those new frontiers, touting \$2.5 billion investments in public schools under his administration with an additional \$340 million in the coming budget. He also asked to double the number of Education Freedom Scholarships – known as school vouchers – to 40,000.

Additionally, Lee cited Memphis crime as an example of chal- See STATE on Page 9

Make plans to attend TML's Legislative Conference March 2-3 in Nashville

Join us at the DoubleTree by Hilton Downtown Nashville hotel Nashville from March 2-3 for the TML Legislative Conference.

The two-day event will feature *Conversations with the Candidates*, a question-and-answer session with candidates for the 2026 gubernatorial race, opportunities to network with fellow city officials, and the chance to meet with your Representatives and Senators to ensure your community's needs are heard by your lawmakers.

On Monday, lunch will begin at 11:30 a.m. The conference program will run from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. Attendees are encouraged to attend the House and Senate floor sessions that evening at the Capitol. The program will continue with breakfast at

7:30 a.m. Tuesday, with the program running from 8 until 9:30 a.m.

Session participants will also be eligible for CMFO or Utility Board Training credits through two programs. The first, *A Word from the Comptroller*, will feature Tennessee Comptroller Jason Mumppower outlining key legislative initiatives his office is advancing, including mandatory deadlines for municipal budget adoption, improving data use and reporting for the Municipal Boundaries Dashboard, and addressing ongoing challenges related to equipment and infrastructure depreciation.

The second program, *The Outlook for Municipal Capital Markets – What's Ahead for Cities in Bonding and Borrowing*, will

feature TMBF CEO Wade Morrell moderating a discussion about the current and future states of the bond and lending markets for municipalities with State Treasurer David Lillard, First Bank CEO Chris Holmes, and TCBS Director of Fixed Income Markus Klar.

The deadline to register is Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2026. [Visit TML's website](#) for additional information and to register for the conference.

If you experience any issues with registering, accessing your account, or updating your information in Engagifi, please contact Corinne Gould at cgoold@tml1.org or Kelly McKinley at kmckinley@tml1.org for assistance.

End of penny production creates challenges

By KATE COIL

With penny production halted and circulation shortages reported by banks and retailers, cities across Tennessee are also looking for guidance on how to handle currency issues.

Perhaps nowhere is the end of penny production felt more than in the towns of Greeneville and Tusculum. Artisan Zinc has been a major employer in both communities for 55 years, and one of the company's primary products is coin blanks, notably all penny blanks manufactured in the U.S.

Jeff Taylor, president and CEO of the Greene County Partnership, has been working alongside officials in Greeneville and Tusculum as well as leaders in Greene County and other area municipalities to support the continued manufacturing of the penny. Taylor said area officials have been advocating for the continued use of the penny since the first efforts to discontinue it began in the 1990s. However, the sudden announcement from President Donald Trump on Super Bowl Sunday 2025 that penny production would end took them by surprise.

"Obviously, we were saddened and shocked that President Trump decided to cancel the penny. We had hoped the penny would never go away," Taylor said. "It was very sudden, and we are still dealing with the aftermath. Artisan prints more than just the penny, but the



With the sudden decision to no longer mint pennies, many banks, retailers, states, and local governments are trying to settle how transactions should work equitably. (Source: U.S. Mint)

penny was the largest driver of that organization."

In the past, municipal and Greene County leaders have worked against eliminating the penny production – along with Americans for Common Cents – because of the risk to an estimated 300 local jobs. Artisan Zinc remains one of the major producers of coin blanks internationally and the company has "300 billion coins circulating in more than 20 countries."

Local leaders have been working with Artisan officials as well

as Gov. Bill Lee, Sen. Marsha Blackburn, and Sen. Bill Hagerty to mitigate the economic damage, particularly through the minting of a new nickel at the site.

"If you get rid of the penny, it creates a higher demand on the nickel," Taylor said. "They have a nickel blank prototype they are trying to get approved through Congress and the U.S. Treasury. They can actually produce the nickel blank for 3.5 cents as opposed to the current 14 cents, which is a \$70

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NEWS ACROSS TENNESSEE



ATHENS

Heil Trailer International officials announced the company is expanding its manufacturing operations in Athens, investing \$9.8 million and creating 18 new jobs. The investment follows the securement of a 10-year U.S. Department of the Army contract for the company's tactical fuel distribution system and comprises the construction of a new warehousing space, state-of-the-art automated paint and welding systems that will create new opportunities for automation technicians, new testing area, and an expanded welding and training school. Founded in 1901 as the Heil Rail Joint Welding Company, the company is now part of the EnTrans International family of brands. The Athens facility has been home to Heil Trailer since 1977.

MEMPHIS

The city of Memphis and Downtown Memphis Commission have received a \$74 million safety grant from the state of Tennessee for public safety and infrastructure improvements in the Beale Street Historic District. Project improvements aim to enhance the public realm, foster a safe and welcoming experience, and preserve the cultural and historic significance of Beale Street, while strengthening its position as a premier destination for locals and visitors. The project scope includes enhancing pedestrian connectivity and streetscapes, creating flexible public spaces for events, improving traffic flow to support high visitation, improving sidewalk accessibility, upgrading street and pedestrian lighting, and introducing around-the-clock safety enhancements.

NASHVILLE

AmericaFWD announced that Nashville is one of three locations in the U.S. selected to receive dedicated technical assistance through the Project Delivery Accelerator Lab, also known as The Lab. The award will provide Nashville's voter-approved [Choose How You Move transportation program](#) with specialized expertise to move the project from funding to active construction, ensuring the community sees tangible improvements in connectivity and equity. By providing direct expertise through The Lab, AmericaFWD helps local leaders navigate complex regulatory environments and accelerate construction on projects focused on reconnecting communities, improving transit, and fostering economic equity. The other two projects are located in Portland, Ore., and Jacksonville, Fla.

NASHVILLE

Nashville's [Jefferson Street Sound Museum](#) and the [Museum of Christian and Gospel Music](#) have been added to [Tennessee's portion](#) of the U.S. Civil Rights Trail. The Jefferson Street Sound Museum shows how music, culture, and activism brought artists like Jimi Hendrix, Etta James, Ray Charles, James Brown, Tina Turner, Little Richard, and countless others to the area. The Museum of Christian and Gospel Music shows the powerful role the genre and its artists played as a source of hope, unity, and inspiration during the Civil Rights Movement.

NEW TAZEWELL

Plans are underway to break ground on a new city hall for New Tazewell in April as part of several projects to improve the downtown area. The \$2 million city hall will be built on a vacant lot on Main Street designed to replicate the train depot. It will house the New Tazewell Police and Street departments and city offices will be located upstairs. A blighted structure next door will be torn down, and a \$500,000 grant will be used for an environmental study before the area is turned into a new parking lot for city hall.

OAK RIDGE

Laser Isotope Separation (LIS) Technologies officials announced the company will expand its operations in Oak Ridge, investing \$1.38 billion and creating 203 new jobs. It is the third-largest nuclear-related investment since the creation of TNECD's Nuclear Energy Fund. The new LIS Tech-

nology facility will locate on the historic K-25 uranium enrichment site and is intended to become the first U.S.-origin commercial laser uranium enrichment plant in the world, supporting U.S. utilities, next-generation reactor developers, and national defense requirements, while helping to reestablish a resilient domestic nuclear fuel supply chain. In 2024, the company [was selected by the Department of Energy](#) as one of six domestic companies to participate in the Low-Enriched Uranium Enrichment Acquisition Program. Founded in 2023 with its office and laser enrichment research and development headquartered in Oak Ridge in the recently renovated K-1330 building, LIS Technologies is the seventh company to locate in Tennessee for its commercial operations utilizing the [Nuclear Energy Fund](#).

OAK RIDGE

Centrus Energy announced a major expansion to transition its Oak Ridge facility to a high-rate manufacturing plant. The expansion will create nearly 430 new jobs and result in investment of more than \$560 million over the next several years to grow workforce for production of advanced centrifuges. The first new centrifuges produced in Tennessee are expected to come online in 2029. Centrus' Technology and Manufacturing Center in Oak Ridge is the only uranium enrichment centrifuge manufacturing facility in the U.S.

SEVIERVILLE

The Sevierville Police Department has received its sixth accreditation from the Tennessee Law Enforcement Accreditation (TLEA). To receive accreditation, agencies must submit to a three-year process in which TLEA evaluates 164 law enforcement standards, including an on-site assessment. The TLEA Accreditation status represents a significant professional achievement and acknowledges the successful implementation of written directives, policies, and procedures that are conceptually sound and operationally effective. It takes commitment, dedication, and hard work from the agency head, agency personnel, and community leaders to meet the standards prescribed by the program.

UNICOI

Ballad Health has announced plans to rebuild [Unicoi County Hospital](#), which was deemed unsafe after it was inundated with floodwaters during Hurricane Helene. The former hospital was located in the town of Erwin while the new hospital will be located in town of Unicoi. The new location was chosen to improve access to emergency services, floodplain concerns, and to align with the growing local economy. Construction of the new hospital is expected to begin in the spring with a two-year timeline to completion. The new hospital will have 10 beds with both inpatient and outpatient services and is expected to cost \$44 million. An urgent care facility will remain open in Erwin throughout the construction of the new hospital.

WATERTOWN

The city of Watertown, Watertown Railroad Museum, Nashville Steam Preservation Society, and Tennessee Central Railroad are partnering to build a new space to honor the city's railroad. Plans call for a 14,000-square-foot facility featuring a museum, restaurant, observation deck, outdoor park, train hosting facility, and event center. Train excursions have been coming into the city for 30 years, and officials are hoping that the

East Ridge FD holds push-in ceremony



Members of the East Ridge Fire Department held a push-in ceremony for Squad-1, the newest apparatus for the department. The 2025 Pierce Enforcer is part of a "continued investment" in the city's emergency service, according to fire officials. The push-in ceremony harkens back to the days when firefighters would have to physically push horse-drawn fire apparatus into stations, symbolizing teamwork and pride as well as readiness to serve the community. (Photo by Frank Pate Photography)

Knoxville cuts ribbon on park upgrades



Officials with the city of Knoxville opened the new pavilion at the city's Urban Wilderness Gateway Park. The new 23,000-square-foot structure includes four bathrooms, a water refill station, picnic tables, and a series of play structures using the area's natural boulders and landscaping. The \$4.6 million upgrades are part of a multi-year project to enhance the park, which acts both as a key entrance to the city's urban wilderness network as well as a recreation area. The park connects 68 miles of trails throughout the city with \$11 million invested in the gateway and connections to Baker Creek Park. A larger vision aims to connect 1,000 acres of outdoor spaces in the city. (Photo submitted by Mayor Indya Kincannon)

Chattanooga officials break ground on first development under new PILOT program



Officials with the city of Chattanooga broke ground on a new affordable housing development, the city's first financed through the revamped Affordable Housing Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) Program. The riverfront development at 702 Manufacturers Road will include 42 affordable homes alongside luxury apartments, allowing families earning around \$45,000 annually to live in the community. Under the program, developers will receive tax abatements for keeping units affordable for at least 15 years. (Photo by Chattanooga)

new facility will drive more tourism. The museum would be open daily with weekend train experi-

ence events and old train cars available to visit. The museum site would be developed out of

the former Railway Express Agency, a brick building in downtown Watertown built in 1900.

WAUFORD

J. R. Wauford & Company, Consulting Engineers, Inc.

State of the Child Report reveals concern over child poverty, childcare costs

By KATE COIL
TT&C Assistant Editor

Nearly one-fifth of Tennessee children are living in poverty as childcare costs soar above rates of in-state tuition for state colleges.

Data from the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth (TCCY)'s [2025 State of the Child Report](#) tracks year-over-year data regarding child wellbeing, welfare, food insecurity, childcare costs, education, and numerous other factors that can predict outcomes for the state's youth.

While the state saw a slight decrease in the number of children living in poverty between 2024 and 2023, the state's rate of 19.1% children living in poverty is still above the national 15.5% and above the 17.6% rate reported in 2022, which was the lowest rate the state saw in a decade.

Research from the study found that supplemental poverty measures, such as tax credits or programs like SNAP, WIC, and TANF, have a significant impact in bringing children and families out of poverty.

Additionally, 22% of Tennessee children live in a household that receives public assistance and 36% live in rental properties. Families who rent and families whose income is less than \$20,000 are more likely to be cost-burdened when it comes to housing, with 23% of Tennessee households with children considered "extremely low income."

Infant based childcare in the state costs \$13,926 per year per child, more than in-state tuition for



Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth's

THE STATE OF THE CHILD IN TENNESSEE 2025

a single year at all of the four-year public universities in Tennessee. An estimated 65% of Tennessee children under the age of six have both parents in the workforce.

These costs are exacerbated by what is known as "[childcare deserts](#)," a census tract where there are not enough childcare centers or slots in those centers to meet the area's childcare needs. Rural areas are the most likely to qualify as childcare deserts.

According to the report, there are 3.7 licensed childcare centers per 1,000 children under the age of 12 in the state. The average capacity of a licensed child-care facility in the state is 82 children. East

and southern Middle Tennessee have the [highest rate](#) of childcare deserts.

Food insecurity has also increased across the state, due to SNAP freezes and the government shutdown in 2025. The report found that all surveyed food banks in the state saw increases in the need for services, particularly among households with children.

The number of live births in the state where the mother and child were on WIC has also been increasing each year since a low of 23,620 in 2021. Last year, WIC was received by 29,243 individuals – a little more than a third of births recorded in the state.

The state's infant mortality rate remained steady at 6.6% in 2024, above the declining national rate of 5.5%. The report cited the need to promote safe sleep practices, smoking cessation programs, and increasing awareness of prenatal services offered by public health departments as key steps to reversing the higher-than-average infant mortality rate.

One out of every three births in the state last year had at least one risk factor for complications with previous Caesarian delivery, gestational hypertension, and gestational diabetes being the most common risk factors.

Additionally, the state is see-

ing higher teen birth rates despite national numbers trending downward. Tennessee has the sixth highest teen birth rate in the country with 20.4 per 1,000 females age 15 to 19 giving birth against a national rate of 13 per 1,000. The number of children under the age of 15 giving birth increased to 71.2 last year, just lower than the highest rate of 72 reported in 2021. The lowest rate in the past decade was 51 in 2020.

Ahead of a 2030 goal, the report found the state is also behind on its childhood vaccination rates. According to the Tennessee Department of Health, the number of children receiving their full schedule of recommended vaccines by two-years-old increased slightly to 78.5% in 2024, up from 77.7% the year before.

This is down from a high of 80.5% in 2018 and short of the state's goals of 90.8% vaccination completion by 2030. Additionally, 3% of children under the age of two have received no vaccinations, above the state's goal of only 1.3% of children not receiving any vaccinations by 2030.

In 2024, 60% of public water systems – serving 88% of Tennesseans – had fluoridated water, one of the major factors in dental health according to the CDC. The report found 78% of Tennessee children had at least one preventative dental visit in the last year.

Demographic data as well as more information on mental health, adversity and resilience, child welfare, and youth justice can be found in the [full report](#) on the TCCY website.

End of penny production creates challenges for local governments

PENNY, from Page 1

to \$100 million savings. There is a huge effort to get this new blank approved. If that does not happen, we will have a definite impact. Fortunately, there has been minimal impact to our job situation so far, but Artzan cannot keep doing what they are doing without getting that nickel blank approved."

Taylor said one of the things holding up the new nickel blank is concern over a lack of guidance.

"When you are dealing with fiscal and monetary policy, you need some guidance so it's not just left up to the whims of businesses but is fair and equitable for all citizens," Taylor said.

Taylor said many in the area are feeling frustration over the entire situation.

"You've got a company that has been here over 50 years and has been a staple of our economy and a great community partner," he said. "No one wants to see anyone lose a job, especially the great-paying jobs they have out there. Just across our county line, J-Tech just lost over 100 jobs to tariffs. What people don't realize is that it's greater than the lost job at one company. That impacts the security people, the cleaning staff, and the money those people spend in the community. This is coinage that supports the entire U.S."

HOW WE GOT HERE

Officially known as the "cent" by the U.S. Mint and the "one cent piece" by the U.S. Treasury, penny production in the U.S. began in 1787 – before the creation of the U.S. Mint in 1792. Since its beginning, the penny has always been a copper or copper-plated coin. It has featured the profile of President Abraham Lincoln since 1909, which was issued to honor the sesquicentennial of the president's birth.

Debate over eliminating the coin began in 1990 due to concerns that the cost of penny production was overtaking the value of the coin. Arguments for penny production conclude that the Mint spends money to make coins whether or not the penny is in production, and that eliminating pennies increases the need for nickels.

On Feb. 9, 2025, President Donald Trump announced he had ordered Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to stop manufacture of new pennies to reduce government spending. While authority ultimately resides with the U.S. Congress in what coins to mint, the treasury secretary has authority to mint coins in amounts they deem necessary.

"The Federal Reserve will continue to recirculate the roughly 114 billion pennies currently in existence for as long as pos-



The Arztan Zinc facility near Tusculum has long been the only source of penny blanks for the U.S. Treasury. With penny production coming to an end, officials with Greeneville, Tusculum, and Greene County have been working with company officials to ensure that the facility can maintain the hundreds of job it has provided the community for the past 55 years. The company is hoping to get approval to mint new nickel blanks for a cheaper rate than is done at present. (Source: Artzan Zinc.)



Penny production began in 1787, making it one of the oldest coins minted in the country. Abraham Lincoln only began appearing on the coin in 1909 to celebrate his 150th birthday. (Source: U.S. Mint)

sible," reads a statement on the U.S. Treasury website. "How long existing pennies remain in circulation depends largely on consumer behavior. The Treasury Department encourages the public to spend their on-hand pennies to support a smooth transition and allow retailers and point-of-sale system providers time to adapt. This initiative aims to help keep the existing supply in circulation, ensuring clarity and fairness at the point of sale during the transition."

Penny shortages have been reported by retailers in recent months, and a bill currently

pending in Congress, known as the Common Cents Act, aims to require cash transactions to be rounded to the nearest nickel. [In nine states](#), law actually prohibits rounding up, so retailers have been rounding down. The U.S. Treasury has not issued guidance for retailers or banks regarding the penny shortages and circulation.

Instead, clarification for rounding has largely been left up to state legislatures, according to a report from the National Conference of State Legislatures. In Tennessee, Rep. Charlie Baum, R-Murfreesboro, introduced [House Bill 1744](#) – and its companion Senate Bill 1810 – to set how different transactions are rounded.

The U.S. is not the first country to eliminate the use of cent coins, but countries including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and several EU nations phased their coins out over a period of years.

GUIDANCE FOR GOVERNMENTS
Tennessee Comptroller of

the Treasury Jason Mumpower [issued guidance](#) for municipalities – including utility systems – to adjust their payment processing practices in a way that is "fair, transparent, and legally sound."

"This guidance is intended to help local governments navigate a practical challenge while maintaining fairness, transparency, and compliance with the law," said Comptroller Jason Mumpower. "Each community is different, and local leaders should adopt policies that make sense for their residents while staying within their legal authority."

The office advises municipalities consider implementing payment procedures for all customer transactions. Options for this include:

- Requiring or encouraging customers to provide exact change when making cash payments;
- Offering alternative payment methods including debit cards, credit cards, electronic checks, or online payment portals;
- Establishing protocols for crediting a customer's account when a customer is paying non-exact cash for recurring payments;
- Declining to accept non-exact cash payments, when authorized; and
- Adjusting rates, fees, and charges within the local government's legal authority to multiples of \$0.05 or \$0.10.

The Comptroller's Office also urges local officials to carefully evaluate any changes before implementation. This includes:

- Consulting with your attorney to ensure you are acting within your legal authority;
- Ensuring any new policies and procedures are reasonable as applied to your local community;
- Refraining from adopting policies and procedures that provide a benefit to one type of payment over another;
- Applying new policies and procedures uniformly;
- Clearly communicating any new policies and procedures to the local community through appropriate channels;
- Training all staff as necessary; and
- Ensuring all policies and procedures comply with government accounting standards and that accounting systems can appropriately address the new policies and procedures.

For further guidance, municipal officials [can contact their regional government](#) finance analyst.

[Additional guidance](#) has also been issued by the Tennessee Department of Revenue on how retailers should calculate sales tax when a transaction from a cash-paying customer is affected by a shortage of pennies as sales and use tax requires calculation to the exact cent.



PEOPLE

Bill Almon, a captain with the Franklin Fire Department, died Jan. 15, 2026, from brain cancer at the age of 49. Almon retired



Bill Almon

as captain of Station No. 6 in April 2025. He spent 27 years with the Franklin Fire Department and was named Fire Office of the Year in 2023, along with winning numerous other awards. Prior to joining the Franklin Fire Department, he joined Williamson County Fire Rescue in 1994 as a volunteer and then was promoted through the ranks, serving as a captain and assistant chief. He was later made a lifetime member of the department. .

George Edwards has been selected as the new fire chief for the city of Hendersonville. Edwards began his career as a firefighter with the department in 1995 and has since been promoted five times. His most recent promotion was to assistant chief of the department in 2023. Edwards takes over the role from Chief Scotty Bush, who retired after nearly 40 years of service.



George Edwards

Daniel Estes, city manager for Elizabethton, has been selected to serve on the Tennessee City Management Association Board at a special called meeting. Estes has served as Elizabethton's city manager since June 2018. Prior to that, he was assistant town administrator for Collierville. He also served as a local elected official and practiced law. Estes holds a bachelor's degree in political science from Tusculum University, a master's of public policy and administration from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and a law degree from Regent University School of Law. He is also a certified municipal finance officer.



Daniel Estes

Chris Jackson has been selected as the new city manager for the city of St. Joseph. Jackson takes over the role from Joan Nelson, who retired from the position. Jackson comes to the city as director of the Southern Tennessee Higher Education Center. He also spent 16 years as a Lawrence County commissioner, being the youngest county commissioner in state history during his first term. He holds a bachelor's degree from



Chris Jackson

the University of North Alabama and has pursued graduate studies at Tennessee Technological University.

Linda McCrary has been selected to fill the vacancy on the Red Boiling Springs City Council left by the death of her husband George in December. A member of the Retired Teachers Association, McCrary is a lifelong Red Boiling Springs resident and served as a librarian for the Macon County Schools system. She has also been a part of numerous city committees and is a certified municipal finance officer.

Robert "Lynn" Murphy, who served in numerous emergency services roles for the city of Clinton, died Thursday, Jan. 29, 2026,



Lynn Murphy

of congestive heart failure. A Clinton native, Murphy began his public service career as a 911 dispatcher for the Anderson County Sheriff's Department. He then served as a patrol officer, supervisor, training officer, and detective. He also served as a volunteer firefighter for the city of Clinton, changing his career to firefighting full-time in 1988. He became a firefighter and emergency medical technician for the Clinton Fire Department, eventually reaching the role of assistant chief. He also served as an instructor for the Tennessee Fire and Codes Academy. He was eventually appointed director of Clinton's emergency services department and then spent 19 years as the city's public works director. He retired in 2018 after more than 40 years of government experience, but remained as a consultant for the city up until his death. Murphy held an associate's degree in criminal justice from Walters State Community College and a bachelor's in political science from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Jim Sells, who was at one point the sixth-longest serving mayor in the country, died Jan. 15, 2026, at the age of 80. Sells served as mayor of Rogersville for 47 years from 1978 to 2025 and served as an alderman for the city from 1971 to 1977. The meeting room for the town's Board of Mayor and Aldermen was named in his honor upon his retirement. Born in Murphy, N.C., Sells came to Rogersville when his father's employment with TVA was transferred. A graduate of Rogersville High School, Sells was also retired from BellSouth.



Jim Sells

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TML meets with TFCA, MTAS



Officials with the Tennessee Municipal League, Tennessee Fire Chiefs Association (TFCA), and Municipal Technical Advisory Service met in Smyrna to discuss opportunities for collaboration and improving public safety in cities and towns across the state. From left to right, La Vergne Fire Chief Ronny Beasley, Smyrna Assistant Fire Chief Camron Phelps, Smyrna Battalion Chief Dwayne Stacey, TFCA President and Ashland City Deputy Chief Brian Briggs, TML Executive Director Anthony Haynes, Hardin County Fire Chief Melvin Martin, TML Senior Director of Communications Corinne Gould, Smyrna Fire Chief Brian Goss, and MTAS Fire Consultant and Technical Consulting Program Manager Steve Cross.

Chattanooga's Kelly to head regional rail initiative

Chattanooga Mayor Tim Kelly has been selected to chair a coalition of municipal and state leaders working toward the creation and enhancement of passenger rail and freight networks in the Atlanta-Chattanooga-Nashville-Memphis rail corridor.

The [Sunbelt Atlantic Compact](#) is looking to connect the four major metro areas through passenger rail, all of which are consistently ranked among the fastest growing cities in the country. The effort would serve around 10 million people – roughly half the population of both Tennessee and Georgia – as well as an estimated 6.7 million commuters.

As Atlanta and Memphis are already connected to the New Orleans to Chicago Amtrak rail line, the



Chattanooga Mayor Tim Kelly

project would also connect Nashville and Chattanooga to the Amtrak rail system. Chattanooga has been the lead agency on the project, which has also been working with

several nonprofits and CSX.

Kelly has been an advocate for the project since its inception and said he would like to the passenger rail system up and running within five to seven years. Kelly has touted the project as a way to lessen traffic congestion and create an economic engine for the region.

The first research phase of the project to determine its viability was funded by a \$500,000 federal grant. The research determined that utilizing existing freight lines for passenger trains would be the simplest approach.

The analysis also found the project could create 10,684 jobs and an estimated \$81.5 million in economic activity in a 20-year span.

Comptroller announces changes in Local Government Audit Division

Tennessee Comptroller Jason Mumpower has announced changes to his office's local government team.

Jim Arnette, director of local government audit, will retire effective March 31, 2026, following 42 years of service to the comptroller's office. In his role, Arnette has played a vital role in strengthening the accountability and transparency in local government across Tennessee.

Under his leadership, the division has overseen financial and compliance audits for all 95 counties and more than 1,700 municipalities and local government-related entities. Arnette's commitment to integrity, efficiency, and innovation has left a lasting impact on local government oversight and public trust.

Arnette began his career in the comptroller's office as a systems analyst in the office of management services, later establishing the information technology audit function within the division of county audit. He became director of the division of county audit in 2007 and then of the local government



Jim Arnette

audit division in 2012. He holds a degree from Middle Tennessee State University and is both a certified government financial manager and certified information systems auditor.

Bryan Burklin has been selected as the new director of local government beginning on April 1, 2026. He originally joined the comptroller's office and the division of local government audit in 1980, serving first in Knoxville and then moving to Nashville in 2015.

He brings deep institutional knowledge and extensive experi-



Bryan Burklin

ence in county and municipal auditing. In his current role, Burklin oversees the review and approval of county audits across Tennessee, helping ensure accuracy, accountability, and public trust in local government reporting. His steady leadership and collaborative approach make him well prepared to lead the division forward.

Burklin is a graduate of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is a certified public accountant and a certified government financial manager.



Municipalities deal with water, power outages after Winter Storm Fern strikes

SNOW, from Page 1

Nashville Mayor Freddie O'Connell announced a [Winter Storm Relief Fund](#) to help address current and growing needs. The fund is a partnership between the United Way, the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee, and Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster with O'Connell stating Brentwood-based Tractor Supply Company had kickstarted the fund with a \$250,000 donation.

In addition to power outages, TEMA Director Patrick Sheehan cautioned that depressurization leading to burst pipes could lead to drinking water issues. TEMA indicated water issues were reported in Clay, Davidson, Dickson, Hardeman, Hardin, Henderson, Hickman, Humphreys, Lewis, Maury, McNairy, Perry, Sumner, Trousdale, Wayne, and Wilson counties. These included water systems in Adamsville, Centerville, Columbia, Erin, Hartsville, Hohenwald, Lobelville, Linden, Nashville, Saltillo, Savannah, Selmer, and Waynesboro.

TEMA reported 115 warming centers were opened by local governments and agencies statewide. In the days immediately following the storm, TEMA officials helped to coordinate and deliver 165 cots and blankets, more than 12,000 cases of water, 700 gallons of gasoline, 1,500 gallons of diesel fuel, 6 Starlinks to assist with communications, and 10,080 pounds of salt to impacted areas statewide.

As freezing rain, dangerously low temperatures, and icy conditions continued, TDOT urged residents to stay off the roads. TDOT crews worked to treat more than 290,000 miles of road, cleared 300 trees, and responded to 861 incidents in the first two days of the storm alone.

Tennessee Highway Patrol (THP) also reported numerous vehicle wrecks in the wake of the storm. Two fatal car crashes were being investigated by THP with health officials to determine if the deaths were weather-related. THP handled 84 crashes involving injury and 400 crashes involving property damage, assisted 1,660 motorists, removed 198 abandoned vehicles and 326 roadway obstructions, and responded to 2 vehicle fires.

Municipal offices across the state were closed Monday, Jan. 26, and Tuesday, Jan. 27, due to the conditions, with many communities delaying garbage pickup and putting focus on plowing, debris removal, and power restoration. Many cities also closed parks and recreation facilities, libraries, local bus services, and canceled meetings to encourage citizens to stay home.

Gov. Bill Lee also ordered the closure of state offices Monday, asking employees to work from alternative locations if possible. The Tennessee General Assembly also closed Jan. 26 and Jan. 27.

Right: Despite freezing temperatures and continued snowfall, Martin Public Works employees report for duty. (Photo by Martin)



Firefighters with Columbia's Fire Station No. 6 take a break from winter storm response to build their own snow fort. (Photo by Columbia)



Linemen with the Jackson Energy Authority work to restore power and ensure lines will not be snapped as a result of the storm. (Photo by Jackson)



City public works employees plow snow and clear roads in downtown Paris. (Photo by Paris)



An Oak Ridge Public Works Department employee prepares the city's snow removal equipment prior to the storm. (Photo by Oak Ridge).



Employees with Brighton's Maintenance Department work to ensure vehicles are ready to plow snow. (Photo by Brighton)



Above: Employees with the Clarksville Streets Department plow Peachers Mill Road during the storm. (Photo by Clarksville)



Right: Crews with the Nolensville Public Works Department clear downed trees from roadways (Photo by Nolensville)

STATE BRIEFS

A new map is [highlighting sources of pollution](#) in state waterways to improve water quality. The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation unveiled a map that helps monitor water quality in streams, rivers, and reservoirs across the state. The map shows that 19,000 miles of the state's 60,000 miles of streams and rivers are listed as "impaired," meaning they have at least one form of pollution or alteration in the water. Some of the most common causes of pollution include habitat degradation, E. coli, soil erosion from agriculture and construction, and run-off of nutrients from fertilizers or pesticides. The agency is hoping the map can be an important resource for water quality monitoring.

Tennessee's December 2025 unemployment rate held steady at 3.6%. The state unemployment rate has remained at 3.6% since July, though no data was recorded for October due to the government shutdown. The U.S. rate for December was 4.4%, down one-tenth of a percentage point from the previous month. Nonfarm employment in the state decreased by 5,100 jobs in December with the largest declines in the trade, transportation and utilities sector; accommodation and food services sector; and the manufacturing sector. Overall, the state added 23,000 nonfarm jobs in the past 12 months with the largest increases coming in professional and business services followed by other services and state government. Tennessee has compiled a comprehensive analysis of the [December 2025 statewide unemployment data](#).

The application window for the [state-funded brownfield grant program](#) is expected to open in March. Known as the Brownfield Redevelopment Area Grant (BRAG), [the goal of the program](#) is to promote conservation of Tennessee's agricultural, recreational, and open space lands by encouraging environmentally sound redevelopment of properties blighted by real or perceived contamination. Two webinars will be held to go over grant basics, application process, and answer questions at two pre-application webinars, the first on [Feb. 24, 2026, from 10:30-11:30 a.m. \(CST\)](#) and the second [Feb. 26, 2026, from 1:30-2:30 pm \(CST\)](#). Both sessions will have the same content, please plan to attend only one. Those who have been awarded BRAG funds in the previous grant cycle should plan to attend so they can apply for additional funding.

Tennessee is the sixth most popular state for in-bound movers, according to a new survey by U.S. News and World Report. Tennessee's low cost of living, mild weather, outdoor opportunities, affordable housing, and job growth were cited as making the state one of the most appealing. Tennessee has seen increased population growth in the past decade with 1.5% growth between 2024 and 2026 with a projected 2.9% population increase by 2028. South Carolina topped the rankings followed by Idaho in second, Alaska in third, North Carolina in fourth, and Maine in fifth. Delaware, South Dakota, Alabama, and Arkansas followed Tennessee, rounding up the top 10.

Infrastructure grants awarded to 20 municipalities

Grants for water and sewer infrastructure were awarded to 20 municipalities through the Infrastructure Planning Grant (IPG) program.

The \$7.4 million in funding was split among 24 entities total and is part of the Rural Economic Opportunity Act. The funds will assist communities and utility districts across Tennessee with long-term planning for their water and sewer systems.

The IPG program is open to utility systems that serve distressed counties and rural communities on the financially distressed utility system referral list. Funds can be used in the following program categories: water system mapping and modeling, water system analysis,

sewer system mapping and modeling, sewer system analysis, asset management related activities, and regionalization studies.

Elizabethton, Erwin, Red Boiling Springs, and Tracy City each received grants of \$500,000. Sneedville received \$482,500 and Ridgely \$476,000. Grants valued at \$400,000 were each awarded to **Lexington, Newbern, and Portland**.

Smithville received a grant of \$249,375 and **Linden** \$210,000 while **Lobelville, Tennessee Ridge, Toone, and Trezevant** each received \$200,000.

Rogersville received a grant of \$194,800, **Chapel Hill** \$160,000, **Livingston** \$114,712.50, **Friendship** \$100,000, and **Bethel Springs**

\$84,787.50.

Additional grants include \$370,000 to the Bloomingdale Utility District, \$500,000 to the Brownlow Utility District of Johnson County, \$199,500 to the Iron City Utility District, and \$190,000 to the Minor Hill Utility District of Giles County.

Applications from communities and utility districts were based on comptroller eligibility, and these systems have been referred to the Board of Utility Regulation (formerly the Utility Management Review Board or the Water and Wastewater Financing Board) because of their net position, non-revenue water, or high levels of debt. More information about the program [can be found online](#).

Seven cities to share in site development grants

More than \$13 million in [state site development grants](#) have been awarded with seven municipalities among the grantees.

The 13 new Site Development Grant (SDG) recipients will help communities invest in infrastructure and engineering improvements to land economic development projects and achieve [Select Tennessee site certification](#).

Bristol's Industrial Development Board will receive \$2,537,381 for property grading and roadway improvements to the Bristol South Industrial Park.

The **Dresden** Industrial Development Board will receive \$865,070 to build out water infrastructure for a pad ready site.

Greeneville and **Tusculum**, in conjunction with Greene County, have received \$306,400 for their joint industrial development board to do due diligence and master planning at Greene Valley.

Lexington's Industrial De-

velopment Board has received \$5 million for speculative building construction at the Timberlake Industrial Park.

Newport, in conjunction with Cocke County, has received \$100,000 for due diligence at the Stokley Moore Site while the **Savannah** Industrial Development Corporation has received \$343,879 for access road construction, tree clearing, and property grading at the Boyd Property.

Additional recipients included Benton, Crockett, Franklin, Meigs, Sequatchie, and Sullivan counties as well as a joint project between Houston and Stewart counties.

The SDG program is part of the Rural Economic Opportunity Act, which provides funding to improve the economies of Tennessee's rural communities.

Since 2016, TNECD has awarded 210 SDGs across the state, totaling over \$130 million in assistance to local communities

and generating 8,417 new jobs for through projects that landed on sites improved through the program.

"Since taking office in 2019, we have made it an administration-wide mission to create greater opportunity in rural Tennessee because we know what happens in our rural communities matters to all Tennesseans," said Gov. Lee. "I am proud to announce funding that will strengthen these communities and position them for future economic investment and job creation."

Applications were reviewed by an advisory committee made up of TNECD, Austin Consulting, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, and the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

Each application was supported by the community's senator and representatives in the Tennessee General Assembly.

Tennessee December 2025 revenues \$82.7M above estimates

Tennessee revenues exceeded budgeted estimates for the month of December with a monthly tax growth rate of 6.09%.

Department of Finance and Administration Commissioner Jim Bryson reported that total December tax revenues were \$2 billion, \$82.7 million more than the budgeted estimate and \$116.5 million more than December 2024.

General fund revenues were \$84.7 million more than the December estimate, while the 4 other funds that share in state tax revenues were \$2 million less than the estimates.

On an accrual basis, December is the fifth month in the 2025-2026 fiscal year.

"Total revenues in December exceeded our budget estimates, primarily due to strong corporate tax receipts," said Bryson. "Sales tax revenues for the month, which

reflect November's retail activities—including Black Friday and post-Thanksgiving sales—performed largely as anticipated, showing steady growth. Corporate tax collections, including franchise and excise taxes, were particularly robust."

"Although fuel tax revenues were slightly below expectations, all other tax categories performed modestly better than our projections. Year-to-date, total revenues continue to remain above our adopted estimates. However, we will closely monitor revenue collections and expenditure trends for the remainder of the fiscal year."

On a year-to-date basis, August through December, total tax revenues are 1.33% greater than the budget estimate, or \$117.6 million above expectations. When compared to this same period last year, total tax revenues have grown

5.22% or \$444.1 million.

General fund revenues are 1.25% greater than the year-to-date budgeted estimate, or \$91.8 million higher. Likewise, general fund collections compared to this same period last year have increased 4.93% or \$349.3 million.

Individual tax performance compared to December 2025 Budgeted Estimates:

- Sales Taxes: Above estimate by 2.06% or \$127.0 million
- Corporate Taxes (Franchise & Excise): Below estimate by 4.45% or \$57.7 million
- Fuel Taxes: Above estimate by 0.17% or \$1 million
- All other taxes: Above estimate by 5.78% or \$47.3 million

Individual tax performance compared to December 2024:

- Sales Taxes: Up 2.38% or \$28.4 million
- Corporate Taxes (Franchise & Excise): Up 19.12% or \$88.3 million
- Fuel Taxes: Down 2.54% or \$2.7 million
- All other taxes: Up 1.69% or \$2.5 million

Individual tax performance compared to August through December 2024:

- Sales Taxes: Up 4.23% or \$256.1 million
- Corporate Taxes (Franchise & Excise): Up 12.56% or \$138 million
- Fuel Taxes: Down 0.25% or \$1.4 million
- All other taxes: Up 6.30% or \$51.3 million

The budgeted revenue estimates for 2025–2026 are based on the State Funding Board's consensus recommendation from Nov. 25, 2024, which was adopted by the first session of the 114th General Assembly in April 2025.

These estimates also incorporate any revenue changes enacted during the 2025 General Assembly session. Monthly estimates for fiscal year 2025–2026 [are available on the state's website](#).

No loan is too large or too small

The city of Collegedale has used various TMBF loan programs 15 times since December of 1988. The latest is for a \$3 million sewer system note issue, which closed in December of 2026. Seated: Collegedale Assistant City Manager/Finance Director Michelle Toro, left, and Collegedale Mayor Morty Lloyd, right. Standing: TMBF Marketing Representative Steve Queener.



The city of Munford has used the TMBF loan programs 11 times since December of 2005. The latest was for a public building authority loan in the amount of \$1.2 million for water and sewer system projects. Seated: Munford Mayor Dwayne Cole, left, and Munford City Recorder/Treasurer Sherry Yvelington. Standing: TMBF Marketing Representative Justin Hanson.



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Statewide series of music surveys needs West Tennessee input

By KATE COIL
TT&C Assistant Editor

West Tennesseans are being asked to participate in the most recent aspect of a larger project aimed at mapping, promoting, and building musical assets across the state.

The [West Tennessee Music Census](#) is the third in a series of initiatives aimed at bringing musicians, venues, music industry professionals, and music nonprofits together to gain a better understanding of the region's music ecosystem.

The survey involves collaboration among the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD), Tennessee Entertainment Commission, and Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, as well as regional partners like Visit Jackson and Jackson Hidden Tracks. Officials are also working with the company Sound Diplomacy to help process data gathered from the survey and in-person meetings.

Jimmy Wheeler, TNECD Director of Music Business Development, said the goal is to gain as much information as possible about West Tennessee's music ecosystem.

"What a music ecosystem study does is a deep dive into a region's music scene," Wheeler said. "Music can be a fabric of a community through all its forms, shapes, and sizes. The study itself has four different pieces to it, and Sound Diplomacy does the asset mapping – which looks at all the venues and things going on in the region – and a regulatory assessment. There are two other components to that where we need the community to come in and help us. One is with the music census, and the other is in-person roundtables."

Participation from local officials is particularly important for both the census and the in-person meetings.

"The music census is for everyone in the region, whether you love music, play music, write music, or own a record store or a venue," Wheeler said. "We want as many people in the region as possible to take this census so we can get a really good subsection of people to inform us. For the in-person roundtables, we will come into centrally located areas in West Tennessee. This could involve participation from mayors, councilmen, artists, or anyone who wants to talk about musicians, live music, education, tourism, and placemaking."

Wheeler said similar surveys have already been conducted by TNECD for Northeast and East Tennessee with plans to conduct similar surveys in Southern Middle Tennessee and the Upper Cumberland beginning in March.

Wheeler said independent studies were also undertaken by the cities of Chattanooga, Memphis, and Nashville with the ultimate goal of putting all results



The West Delta Heritage Center in Brownsville showcases the wide variety of musical heritage found in the West Tennessee region, including rockabilly, blues, pop, and more. West Tennessee municipal officials and employees can help preserve and promote their community's music heritage by helping with West Tennessee Music Census by the end of March. (Photo by the West Delta Heritage Center)

together in a statewide map.

"Sound Diplomacy will take the information from the census, roundtables, asset mapping, and regulatory assessment and then come back to us with about 20 recommendations," he said. "We'll then talk about those recommendations, get feedback from the community, and then put it together in one large report. The long-term goal is to have a database that anyone can access across the state, pull out their region, and see what these regions do. The studies determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and the threats. The idea is really to get a better understanding of music ecosystems in each region and the best ways to maximize those opportunities."

Recommendations could be anything from adding new venues and event spaces to adding a day onto popular festivals. Wheeler said results from the Northeast Tennessee and Nashville surveys have already rendered actionable items.

For Nashville, Wheeler said the survey found high parking costs were negatively impacting buskers on Broadway, leading to the city collaborating with local parking groups to provide performers with free spots.



The Tennessee Entertainment Commission has worked with several local partners to conduct the West Tennessee Census with two more projects planned for regions in Middle Tennessee. Surveys have already been conducted in East Tennessee with results presently being turned into action items. (Photo by Tennessee Entertainment Commission)

The results of the [Northeast Tennessee Census](#) found a \$75.6 million music-based economy and regulatory hurdles to supporting larger venues and expanding genre diversity.

Wheeler said the survey found there is enough interest to add another music festival in Bristol and support for creating a centralized space for artists to collaborate and learn about issues such as taxes and business management.

Additionally, the survey led

to officials in Northeast Tennessee and in bordering Virginia and North Carolina to establish a group aimed at promoting unique Appalachian music styles.

Wheeler said he encourages officials in West Tennessee to [take the survey](#), engage with the commission, and keep their eyes out for updates on results. He added that officials in Middle Tennessee should be ready for their projects to begin in March.

"We want to come alongside

our communities statewide to help them drive economy and bolster tourism," he said. "Music has a way to do that without breaking the bank. We don't just want Nashville to be the Music City; we want Tennessee to be the music state."

For more information, reach out to TNECD Director of Music Business Development Jimmy Wheeler at jimmy.wheeler@tn.gov.

Art exhibit showcases talent of Kingsport city employees

By KATE COIL

A special exhibit at the Circle Gallery at Kingsport City Hall is showing a different side of city employees.

Kingsport Cultural Arts, a department within the city, is hosting the exhibit of art works created by some of the 750 talented city employees. Works on display are in a variety of mediums, including pencil sketches, paintings, mixed media, digital art, fiber art, photography, and graphic design.

Kristie Leonard, special events and cultural arts manager with Kingsport Cultural Arts, said submissions were open to all city employees under the same guidelines for any art exhibit at the Circle Gallery.

"We knew there are diverse interests within our workforce, so we opened the show up to all mediums of art," Leonard said. "Employees featured have come from several different departments including public works, water, the public library, parks, fleet maintenance, and our own arts department. Most do not have a connection between their art and work, and the creations showcase hobbies and talents outside of their profession."

Works from a total of 10 employees were selected for the show. Leonard said the city did a

similar art show in 2024, and found the exhibit is a great way to help citizens connect with municipal employees.

"The city of Kingsport is known as a welcoming and friendly city," she said. "We have a workforce that takes great pride in their service to the citizens, and we see this on a daily basis as we are always hearing stories of employees going above and beyond. We love for the public to get to know the people who work to make our city a great place to live."

In addition to showcasing the skills of municipal employees to residents, the exhibit has also built connections among employees.

"The show has given coworkers something to bond over," Leonard said. "We see coworkers of the individual artists coming to the gallery to check out their friends' work, and the artists also have bragging rights for their piece to be featured in an art show. The idea for the show came about as we would visit and chat with our coworkers. We talk about families and hobbies and sometimes they show off a project they're working on."

The results unveiled artistic skills in unexpected places.

"We realized we have so many coworkers who have hidden talents and thought it would be a fun way for coworkers to get to know each



The Circle Gallery at Kingsport City Hall is exhibiting works of art created by city employees, ranging from pencil sketches and painting to mixed media, digital art, fiber art, photography, and graphic design. The exhibition serves as both a unique way to show off employee talent to the public and as a teambuilding exercise among municipal coworkers. (Photo by Kingsport Cultural Arts)

other better and the public to see a more human side of city workers," Leonard said.

Another goal of the exhibit is to emphasize the importance of work-life balance.

"The city of Kingsport is invested in their employee's well-being, whether on the job or in their personal life," Leonard said. "We

love to encourage employees to try something new or learn new skills.

We all know that balance is a huge factor in keeping employees happy at their jobs. Encouraging employees to participate has given them an opportunity to make new art or maybe even revisit an old hobby."

Leonard encourages other municipalities to consider hosting

their own art show.

"We've had so much fun with this show," she said. "We are in our second year and plan to make this an annual event. If you have a chance to do something fun and encourage employees, why not do it. You'll be surprised at what hidden talents you will uncover."

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State Data Center: Tennessee has nation's eighth largest population increase in 2025

Tennessee State Data Center

Tennessee's population increase was the nation's 8th largest last year – adding nearly 64,000 new residents and reaching a population of 7.32 million people.

New population estimates [released by the U.S. Census Bureau](#) show Tennessee was again listed among the country's fastest-growing states. The state added 68,785 new residents between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025 – a 0.88% one-year increase.

That pushed Tennessee's population to a mark of 7,315,076 people on July 1, 2025.

Net domestic migration, the difference between inbound and outbound movers to and from other states, was the main contributor to Tennessee's population gains. It resulted in the addition of 42,389 people – the fourth highest in the country behind the Carolinas and Texas.

But it was also the third straight year that this component slipped from the state's record high in 2022. That was part of a broader slowing of domestic migration in Tennessee and its bordering states. Only Tennessee and Alabama saw decreases compared to last year's levels.

International migration added almost 18,000 new residents to Tennessee's population in 2025. This was a sizeable 30,000-person drop compared to the 2024 level, which grew to nearly 48,000 people – a one-year high.

A [new method for determining the state and county where humanitarian migrants settled](#) in the U.S. was behind the significant upward revision of the net international migration figures that were published in December 2024. That new data showed that net international migration outpaced domestic migration in 2024.

[Every state in the country](#) saw lower levels of international migration in 2025, and further slowing is expected in 2026. While the component is still [projected to remain net positive](#) at the national level next year, declining rates of immigration and accelerated emigration could see some states tipping into negative territory. That hasn't happened to a measurable degree [since 2003](#) when six states had single-year, net negative numbers.

The South Region of the U.S., which stretches from Delaware and Florida in the east to Texas and Oklahoma in the west, was once again the nation's fastest-growing region, with a 0.9% population increase in 2025. That was down from gains of 1.3 to 1.4% between 2022 and 2024.

The south's decelerating growth rate last year was part of a [larger national trend that saw population change slow in all four regions of the country](#) and all but 2 states. The historic declines in net international migration were clearly a factor in last year's drop.

The immigration-related policy shift brings domestic migration back into focus as the [predominant component of population change](#) for Tennessee and many other states.

On that front, it is also clear that the South Region of the U.S. got off to a hot start in the 2020's. The region has pulled residents from other parts of the country at a 50% higher clip than it did during the last decade's sluggish start in the wake of the Great Recession. And through 2025, the south region has been the only part of the country to maintain positive levels of net domestic migration this decade, except for a [Midwest region rebound in 2025](#).

But a trend of slowing migration to the South is becoming evident. Following a sharp drop in 2024, the South Region of the U.S. sank to its lowest level of domestic migration in 2025, gaining 357,800 people. That was the smallest increase that the

region has seen from this component since 2018.

Tennessee is among the group of states that have seen net domestic migration cool over the past three years, but it's the region's two most populous states that account for a large portion of that decrease. Florida's domestic migration is down 93% from its national-high net gain of 310,892 people in 2022, adding just 22,517 people from this component in 2025. Texas's levels of net domestic migration have slowed 69%. Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma and South Carolina have also experienced slowdowns since 2022.

Tennessee was the 10th fastest-growing state on a percentage basis in 2025, and its population gain ranked as the 8th largest. The state has consistently hovered around these marks throughout the 2020s – a decade which has featured unusual levels of population volatility.

The decade began with a marked increase in deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic that led to the state's first natural decreases. This was followed by record numbers of inbound movers from other states in 2022 and a separate surge in international migration that peaked in 2024. In fact, the Bureau's revised population estimate figures show that Tennessee's 98,262-person increase in 2024 was the largest in the state's history.

Through the first half of the decade, Tennessee has added nearly 402,000 new residents. That is only surpassed by the period from 1990 to 1995 when the state added 450,000 new residents at the start of the most expansive decade in the state's history.

The Volunteer State has experienced record highs and lows this decade, but through those extremes has managed to maintain a top position among the states adding the most population.

**Feb. 28: Sevierville***Appalachian WordFest*

Sevierville is excited to introduce Appalachian WordFest, Rose Glen Literary Festival's newest iteration. This one-day event celebrates the words and creativity emerging from the beloved Appalachian Mountains by bringing together authors, young poets, publishers, and book lovers.

Feb. 28: Oak Ridge*International Festival*

Head to Oak Ridge for the 27th annual International Festival, a Children's Museum of Oak Ridge tradition. The festival features a variety of world cultures through performances, food, crafts, children's activities, and more.

March 6: Etowah*Cousin Jack Tullock Memorial Bluegrass Festival*

This annual festival honors the legacy of Cousin Jake Tullock, an Etowah native and influential bluegrass musician best known for his work as an upright bassist and vocalist with Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys.

March 6-8: Pigeon Forge*Pigeon Forge Chuck Wagon Cookoff*

Pigeon Forge invites Western lifestyle enthusiasts, foodies and those in search of a hearty meal to the Chuck Wagon Cookoff weekend.

March 7: Knoxville*Mardi Growl*

Mardi Growl is a beloved Knoxville tradition and benefits more than 11,000 pets that need care annually at Young-Williams Animal Center.

March 15: Dickson*Luck of the Irish St. Patrick's Day Festival*

The second annual festival will feature more than 100 craft and retail vendors, an assortment of food trucks, helicopter rides, a roller coaster car, inflatables, a petting zoo, pony rides, mobile mining, carnival games, face painting, and much more.

March 21: Bell Buckle*Daffodil Day*

Held the third Saturday in March, this quaint little festival began in 1978 to celebrate the coming of Spring and the thousands of daffodils that line the roads and farmlands for a six-mile stretch of highway leading into Bell Buckle.

March 21: Erin*64th Annual Irish Celebration*

The 64th Irish Celebration includes over 100 food and craft vendors, live music, a carnival with rides and games and a Grand Parade that includes floats, old cars, and other entries.



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Lee delivers eighth State of the State address

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lenges that “actually span governors and span decades.”

“Memphis crime has been one of our most frustrating challenges that many of you in this room tonight wrestled with long before I came into office,” Lee said. “From day one, we have looked for opportunities to create lasting change in a city that is more than worth fighting for. Over the years, good faith efforts have resulted in incremental progress, and that deserves recognition.”

Lee cited the Memphis Safe Task Force for helping to reduce crime in Shelby County by 55%, making 5,500 arrests, and finding numerous missing children. He called for \$80 million in grants to add 100 state troopers to Shelby County. He also advocated for increasing the number of state troopers serving statewide to a benchmark of 1,300.

To combat the rural healthcare crisis, Lee said the federal Rural Health Transformation Fund will provide the state with more than \$1 billion over the next 5 years to help rural hospitals, EMS, and primary care doctors. However, he said, “government overregulation stands in the way” and asked for the changes to existing Certificate of Need laws, which Lee said have blocked \$1.5 billion in healthcare investment in Tennessee since 2000.

As part of his economic proposals, Lee cited investments like BlueOval City, Oracle, xAi, Orano, and In-N-Out. He also called for an additional \$25 million to the Nuclear Fund as part of continued economic investment, as well as the new Tennessee Quantum Initiative, a statewide effort to position Tennessee as the national leader in quantum research, infrastructure, and workforce development.

Lee’s \$57.9 billion budget also includes:

Economic Opportunity & Tax Relief

- \$20 million investment in Tennessee’s Rainy Day Fund
- \$8 million to expand the Tennessee Youth Employment Program
- \$25 million in further investment in the Tennessee Entertainment Commission

Infrastructure & Housing

- \$425 million to the Tennessee Department of Transportation for infrastructure
- \$165 million to renovate and replace Tennessee’s rest areas and welcome centers
- \$56.2 million to support infrastructure needs for commercial and general aviation
- \$30 million to create the Starter Home Revolving Loan Fund to support construction of new, affordable starter homes for hardworking Tennesseans, prioritizing rural communities
- \$25 million further investment in the Rural Development Fund
- \$1.5 million to bring more direct international flights to Tennessee

Education

- \$339 million for programs including the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement formula funding, summer learning camps, and raising starting teacher pay to \$50,000
- \$20 million for K-12 facilities and maintenance grants at public schools
- \$40 million to support facilities improvements at public charter schools
- \$3 million to expand the school-based behavioral health liaison program
- \$155 million to double Education Freedom Scholarships

Higher Education

- \$350 million to fund construction of a new College of Medicine Interdisciplinary Building at University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis
- \$71.7 million to support capital maintenance projects at Tennessee’s higher education institutions
- \$10 million further investment in the Governor’s Investment in Vocational Education program to support nu-



Gov. Bill Lee greets spectators and members of the General Assembly following his State of the State address. (Photo by Speaker Cameron Sexton’s Office)

clear workforce education, as recommended by the Nuclear Energy Advisory Council

- \$3 million for Next-Gen Academies at Tennessee Tech University for nuclear and cyber technologies
- \$39.4 million to fully fund the outcomes-based funding formula, which may be used for program improvements that assist higher education institutions in meeting outcomes including student progression, degree production, research and service, efficiency metrics, and other measures related to institutional mission
- \$3.5 million for the Corrections Education Investment Initiative

Healthcare and Families

- \$205 million utilizing Shared Savings to strengthen healthcare initiatives, including funding Rural Health Transformation Resiliency Grants
- \$230 million to TennCare to cover increasing costs associated with medical inflation, including higher prescription drug prices and Medicare payments, and increased utilization and services
- \$34.5 million to Department of Children’s Services (DCS) to assist with reducing caseload ratios
- \$10.7 million to enhance staff safety at DCS facilities that accommodate delinquent youth
- \$15 million for capital project and maintenance grants to YMCAs across Tennessee
- \$24.2 million to continue a Department of Health Dental Pilot Program to address unmet dental service needs and increase the number of dentists in Tennessee
- \$1 million non-recurring grant to non-profit partner Live Like Lou Foundation for ALS research

- \$500k recurring grant to non-profit partner The Next Door to assist women in recovery from substance use
- \$500k recurring grant to non-profit partner The Jason Foundation, which provides educational and awareness programs related to youth suicide
- \$250k recurring grant to non-profit partner Families Free, which provides treatment, education, and intervention services to families

Safe Neighborhoods

- \$100 million to bolster the Governor’s Response and Recovery Fund which provides support to individuals, businesses, and communities after natural disasters
- \$80 million for public safety grants to enhance crime prevention and increase public safety in Memphis
- \$83 million to Tennessee Department of the Military for construction of a new Army Aviation Support Facility in Rutherford County
- \$37.5 million for salary in-



Gov. Bill Lee meets with lawmakers from across the state and across the aisles prior to the address. (Photo by Gov. Bill Lee’s Office)



House Speaker Cameron Sexton, left, and Lt. Gov. Randy McNally, right, talk with other lawmakers following the State of the State address. (Photo by Speaker Sexton’s Office)

creases and creation of an additional 50 State Trooper and related support staff positions to improve public safety across the state

- \$20 million for capital improvements at the West Tennessee and East Tennessee Regional Juvenile Justice Centers
- \$1.7 million recurring grants to non-profit partners that combat human trafficking and support survivors
- \$1 million recurring grant to non-profit partner Men of Valor, which provides faith-based reentry support for incarcerated individuals
- \$250k recurring grant to Lipscomb University’s LIFE Program, which provides higher education opportunities for incarcerated individuals
- \$500k recurring grant to non-profit partner Tennessee

Prison Outreach Ministry, which provides faith-based reentry support for individuals and their families

Conservation

- \$81.6 million to create 3 new Tennessee State Parks, creating a total of 14 new state parks under Gov. Lee’s leadership, setting the Tennessee record for the most state parks created by one administration
- \$1.6 million for the Sub-surface Sewage Disposal Program, reducing waiting times for permitting services and oversight
- \$1.1 million to support further enhancement of Tennessee’s electric grid

Nuclear Energy & Innovation

- \$50 million to continue Tennessee’s efforts to lead the nation in adoption of artificial intelligence technology and

make government work more efficiently for Tennesseans

- \$25 million further investment in the Nuclear Energy Fund to attract advanced nuclear technology companies, ensuring Tennessee continues leading the nation as the epicenter of America’s nuclear renaissance
- \$20 million to complete the relocation of the North Data Center
- \$20 million to accelerate Tennessee’s quantum computing industry by attracting substantial federal and private-sector investment and to translate our scientific strengths into durable, high-wage job creation across advanced manufacturing, life sciences and logistics industries
- \$2 million to aid in the expansion of agricultural technologies in rural communities