



## You spoke, we listened!

In just a few weeks, municipal officials from across Tennessee will gather in Kingsport for the 86th Annual TML Conference and Expo. The city has rolled out the red carpet and is excited to highlight its distinctive restaurants, vibrant music offerings, scenic regional attractions, and celebrated golf course. Because of your feedback, we've built in time for you to enjoy these experiences and discover even more.

TML members shared that they wanted conferences to create lasting memories—fresh destinations to explore and plenty of time to appreciate the character of the

host city. Municipal leaders and exhibitors emphasized the importance of expanded Expo hours to connect and discover cutting-edge products and innovative services. Many also expressed a desire for a renewed atmosphere and a different backdrop.

You spoke, and we listened. Kingsport 2026 reflects your vision. Come experience all that's new and see the difference for yourself. You'll be glad you did.

Anthony Haynes  
TML Executive Director

## Learn to tell your city's story at TML's Annual Conference

Acclaimed Appalachian storyteller Dr. Hannah Harvey will keynote the opening session of the 86th TML Annual Conference, to be held July 9-12 at the MeadowView Conference Resort & Convention Center in Kingsport.

Raised on a farm in Blountville, Dr. Harvey knows Tennessee and the stories to be found in towns small and large. She will offer practical tips and techniques for city leaders to identify and tell their community's unique story in an engaging and memorable style.

A repeat performer at Jonesborough's [National Storytelling Festival](#) as well as various festivals and events across the U.S., UK, and Morocco, Harvey is an award-winning communicator whose ethnographic stories trace the cultural roots of Appalachian folklore outward globally, and then connect this folk heritage back with the lived histories of Appalachian people and places.

She holds a doctorate in communication studies/performance ethnography from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, is a past president of Storytelling in Higher Education, and was invited to provide courses for The Great Courses and GreatCoursesPlus. She also served for four years as Managing Editor of *Storytelling, Self, Society* journal. Her work has also been featured in PBS News Hour, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Blue Ridge Magazine*, and *Theatre Guide London*.

One of her most recent projects was with Kingsport's [Bays Mountain Park & Planetarium](#), where she helped produce a live amphitheater and planetarium storytelling series based on original archaeological and oral history: *Stories of the Mountain*.

Beyond the keynote addresses and educational workshops, conference attendees also have several opportunities to elevate their conference experience. These include:

- **Race You to Conference:** A special event on July 9 at Bristol Motor Speedway. Attendees with the Drive the Track Pass will have

the opportunity to take their own vehicle on the track from 4-6 p.m. Dinner at the Speedway will follow from 6-8 p.m., offering time to connect with fellow attendees overlooking the iconic track. For those who don't intend to drive laps, transportation will be offered to and from MeadowView.

- **TML Golf Tournament:** On July 11, municipal leaders will take to the premier Cattails at MeadowView Golf Course. Opened in 1998, Cattails is recognized as one of the top public golf courses in Tennessee. Proceeds will benefit the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee.
- **BEMO Breakfast:** From 7:30-9:30 a.m., July 11, in the MeadowView Ballroom, this event is hosted by the Black Elected Municipal Officials (BEMO).
- **WIMG Luncheon:** The Women in Municipal Government (WIMG) Luncheon will be hosted by the leaders of WIMG on July 11 from 11 a.m. until 12:30 p.m. in the MeadowView Ballroom.
- **Kingsport Experiences:** Visit Kingsport has arranged a variety of experiences, from guided hikes at Bays Mountain to discounted tickets to the Kingsport Axmen baseball game, all intended to enhance your time in the region.

All registrations will be made through our new platform, [Engagifii](#). For further questions or assistance, contact [Kelly McKinley](#) or [Corinne Gould](#).

## TML Annual Report now available

The Tennessee Municipal League's [2025 Annual Report](#) is now available.

The annual report updates TML membership on league financials, an overview of the legislative session, partnerships and member engagement and outreach.

One of the key goals achieved from the strategic plan laid out from the TML Visioning Committee was the redesign of the TML logo to reflect a modern, future-focused league.

Other achievements highlighted in the report include:

- Outcomes of the 128 bills TML took positions on during the legislative sessions
- Overviews from TML in-person events including conferences and district meetings
- Updates on the establishment of the Center for Local Planning at the University of Tennessee Institute of Public Service (UT-IPS)

The report can be [found online](#) at the TML website under the Publications tab.



## WET Center aims to innovate resilient infrastructure solutions

By KATE COIL  
TT&C Assistant Editor

A new state-run facility aims to give public works, city planning, emergency services, and municipal leaders a better understanding of how water can impact public infrastructure and public safety.

The [Water Education and Training \(WET\) Center](#) is located between Bolivar and Middleton at the University of Tennessee's Lone Oaks Farm. State officials recently broke ground on the center, which aims to train public infrastructure professionals and decision-makers on building resilient infrastructure and responding to water-related challenges.

David Blackwood, executive director of the West Tennessee River Basin Authority, was an engineer for the 20-county authority region when he had the initial idea for the center. Blackwood said while providing technical assistance and response after flooding, he noticed several communities seemed to be dealing with the same issues after recurring, seasonal floods. However, he didn't understand why it was happening.

"It made me think that if I'm an engineer finding unexpected things and learning new things, surely someone else has the same



A rendering of the future Water Education and Training (WET) Center in Tennessee, which will help public infrastructure professionals, government leaders, first responders, and students learn more about water-related challenges and resilient infrastructure. (Photo by WET Center)

"misconceptions," Blackwood said. "We started looking at the best way to tackle this issue. We learn best by seeing things first-hand, and that planted the seed that if we had a place to cause these things to happen in a controlled environment so we see how water and soil work together, we could accelerate this learning and empower people to tackle these problems."

Allison Franklin, WET Center executive director, said Blackwood took the idea and presented it to oth-

ers in the field to see if they would also be interested in the project.

"He took it to others, and said 'is this crazy?'" Franklin said. "They told him it was crazy, but it also sounded awesome."

### COMING TOGETHER

Initially, the main issue Blackwood wanted the center to tackle was how flooding impacts roadways. Stakeholders pulled together data and conducted a feasibility

See [WET on Page 10](#)

## Even with extended deadline, online ADA requirements create challenges for cities

By KATE COIL

While the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) [has extended deadlines](#) for government websites to meet new compliance requirements under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), state and local leaders across Tennessee are working together to ensure all citizens have access to digital information.

The revision has given municipal governments with populations of 50,000 or more until April 26, 2027, and those with less until April 26, 2028, to meet the stipulations. The standards of [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#) laid forth in the original rule remain in place.

How governments can best comply with the ruling was the subject of a panel discussion at the Tennessee Digital Government Summit in Nashville. Brentwood Technology Director Sarah VanWormer, Tennessee Department of Disability and Aging Digital Accessibility Coordinator Alexandria Eddings, and Tennessee Enterprise Project Management Office Senior Enterprise Project Director April Romero discussed implementation ahead of the new deadline.

Romero said it is important to keep in focus that the rule is intended to provide accessibility to the 1.7 million Tennesseans living with a



Adaptive technology, like the screen reader seen here, is essential for those with visual impairment to navigate online spaces. However, many government websites are not built to suit this technology and, as a result, can make it difficult for those with disabilities to access vital services, ranging from public libraries to parks and recreation programming to police departments and even participating in local government meetings. New changes to online spaces for local governments under Title II of the ADA seek to remedy these concerns and make municipal websites, mobile apps, and social media sites more accessible for all residents. (Photo by the National Council on Aging)

disability and the growing population of senior citizens who increasingly need similar accommodation.

"If you think back to before COVID, someone who needed services would get someone to drive them to a state or local facility and take them in to get services," Romero said. "During COVID when offices closed, imagine what that did to those

Tennesseans who might not have the capabilities or didn't have some to help them with online accessibility."

### LOCAL CHALLENGES

While Brentwood is a city with a larger IT department than many, VanWormer said it can still be difficult for her staff to support the city's 19  
See [ADA on Page 5](#)



Save the Date

TENNESSEE MUNICIPAL LEAGUE 1940

86th Annual Conference  
in Kingsport,  
July 9-12, 2026

## NEWS ACROSS TENNESSEE



### CLARKSVILLE

Clarksville's Neighborhood and Community Services Department has been awarded a \$150,000 implementation grant to support the launch of the city's Financial Empowerment Center (FEC). The grant comes through a partnership with the national [Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund](#). The Clarksville FEC will provide professional one-on-one financial counseling and coaching to help local residents build financial stability and long-term economic resilience as a free public service. At the core of the FEC model is the integration of counseling into other social services, such as housing and foreclosure prevention, workforce development, prisoner reentry, benefits access, domestic violence services, and more. This award marks a major investment in the long-term financial stability of Clarksville residents. This initiative is strengthened through local matching support, including funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HOME-ARP and the city's allocation of Tennessee Opioid Settlement funding, reinforcing Clarksville's commitment to addressing both immediate financial hardship and long-term economic resilience. The city anticipates launching services in the fall of 2026 following the hiring and training of certified financial counselors.

### COLLIERVILLE

The town of Collierville has unveiled a new [Traffic Safety Hub](#) aimed at providing updates, educational resources, and safety tips for residents, regardless of how they navigate through town. The online resource provides traffic safety for vehicles, bikes, and pedestrians and is a unified effort from the town's engineering, police, fire, and public information departments. The goal of the hub is to help encourage sharing the road responsibility as well as highlighting the network of greenways, trails, sidewalks, and roadways residents can walk and bike through Collierville. The hub also allows residents to report potholes, road failures, traffic signal issues, and other road hazards.

### CHATTANOOGA

The city of Chattanooga is moving forward with plans to donate a derelict former hotel property into a stepping stone to help local residents exit homelessness. The city acquired the Airport Inn property and is in the process of transferring it to The Grateful Gobbler, a non-profit organization that benefits the Maclellan Shelter for Families. With a \$2.3 million seed donation from the Maclellan Foundation, renovations on the former hotel property will create a secure and professionally operated shelter designed for providing beds to families with children experiencing homelessness. To be named Provident Place, the shelter will have room for 120 parents, caregivers, and children. The shelter will also provide a day-to-day family support model with coaching, case management, parenting support, housing and public services navigation, and connections to childcare, employment, mental health, transportation, and other community resources to help families transition to permanent housing.

### GALLATIN

The city of Gallatin has received a bond rating upgrade from Moody's Ratings, moving the

city to an Aa1 rating, the second highest rating available for local governments. By achieving this higher rating, the city can secure lower interest rates when borrowing money for major infrastructure and capital projects such as roads, utilities, public safety facilities, and parks. As part of the process, the firm reviewed the city's water, sewer, and electric system bonds, but the upgrade was due large in part to the city's expanding residential, commercial, and industrial development, along with healthy financial reserves and consistent financial performance. Moody's additionally cited Gallatin's growing tax base, economic activity, and overall financial stability as positive indicators for the city's future.

### HUMBOLDT

Reinhausen Inc., officials announced the company is expanding operations at its production facility in Humboldt, creating 90 jobs and investing \$6.7 million. The project will support the company's accelerated customer demand for advanced transformer production, voltage regulation, and grid-automation technologies. Founded in Germany in 1868, Reinhausen first expanded to the U.S. in 1987 when it established operations in Alamo. A few years later, the company relocated its U.S. hub to Humboldt, where it has remained ever since. The company operates on six continents across the globe and has approximately 5,000 employees

### KINGSPORT

The Kingsport Aquatic Center will undergo \$1.5 million in infrastructure upgrades and improvements to five pools, upgrades to the pump room, covers on all main drains, upgrades to the indoor slide and splash pad, and updated paint and other improvements to the outdoor leisure pool and play structure. Work is slated to begin Sept. 8, 2026, after the summer season, with some temporary closures expected.

### SMYRNA

After seven years of planning, coordination, and construction, the city of Smyrna has unveiled the major traffic and safety improvements on its Lowry Street corridor. The city requested a TDOT Safety Audit of the corridor in 2019, which includes major intersections at Jefferson Pike, and along Sam Ridley Parkway at the ramps to Interstate 24. Following the analysis, new signals were recommended at both intersections, realigning the ramps and creating new configurations to reduce conflict points. Construction began in October 2024 with a signalization project that began in April 2025 finishing in June 2026.

### STANTON

The town of Stanton has welcomed its first police vehicle, a fully-equipped 2026 Ford Police Interceptor Utility, made possible through an investment by Ford Community Relations as part of Ford's Good Neighbor Plan. The vehicle will serve as the primary patrol unit for the Stanton Police Department, which was formally established in 2025. The establishment of the Stanton Police Department and acquisition of its first patrol vehicle are part of the town's broader efforts to enhance municipal services and prepare for the opportunities associated with continued growth throughout the region.

## Chattanooga, Cleveland receive Thrive grants

Two Tennessee municipalities will benefit from Civic Experiments grants provided through the [Thrive Regional Partnership](#), with support from the [Trust for Civic Life](#).

As part of Chattanooga's National Park City program, Friends of Outdoor Chattanooga received a grant for the [Chattanooga National Park City Seed Drive](#), a program asking residents to submit ideas or "seeds" that offer place-based, actionable, and repeatable projects that require collaboration with the

potential to grow into larger, community-building initiatives.

The city of Cleveland received funds for its Creative Spark initiative to activate vacant and underutilized spaces through immersive civic experiments in the city's emerging Arts and Entertainment District. The city is working with local artists and Understory Exp to create temporary "civic living rooms" featuring art installations, performances, and facilitated community dialogue.

## Madisonville unveils new community mural



A new mural at Madisonville's Houston Park has been unveiled by the Downtown Madisonville Alliance. The project brought together students, volunteers, local leaders, and community leaders, with each of the mural's 600 tiles painted by a community member. More than 500 of the tiles were contributed by local art students, who attended the unveiling along with their teachers and families. Together, each tile forms a singular image, expressing the community's unity, creativity, and pride. The mural is now a new stop on Madisonville's downtown public arts trail. (Photo by Downtown Madisonville Alliance)

## Ground broken on Portland TCAT expansion



Local officials, community members, and students gathered to break ground on an expansion of Portland's Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT). The \$47 million project will construct three buildings totaling 78,435 square feet. The expansion will include additional classrooms, program labs and shops, clinics, student support rooms, lounge spaces, and offices. Additionally, TCAT Portland will offer three new programs following the expansion: automotive technology, heavy equipment technology, and HVAC/refrigeration technology. Enrollment at the Portland campus has increased 25% since 2022, and officials are hoping the expansion will open more spaces for students across the region. (Photo by Madison Cook/Main Street Media)

## Crossville officials cut ribbon on new fire hall



The Crossville City Council, City Manager Valerie Hale, and the Crossville Fire Department celebrated the opening of the new Fire House No. 2 during an open house. Replacing a previous fire hall, the cost of the \$3.5 million state-of-the-art facility was covered by tax revenue generated by the Buc-ee's in Crossville. It will be staffed by four full-time firefighters and features sleeping quarters, a training center, kitchen, equipment storage areas, TV room, and three-bay garage. From left to right, Crossville Mayor R.J. Crawford, Valerie Hale, Councilmembers Mark Fox, Art Gernt, Mike Turner and James Mayberry. (Photo by Gary Nelson/Crossville Chronicle)

## Franklin earns Top Workplace honor



The city of Franklin has been awarded a Top Workplaces 2026 honor by the Tennessean, an honor based solely on [employee feedback](#) gathered through a third-party survey administered by employee engagement technology partner [Energage](#). The confidential survey uniquely measures the employee experience and its component themes, including employees feeling respected and supported, enabled to grow, and empowered. With more than 90% of employees participating, survey results found 88% believe their teams work well together, 88% are satisfied with their jobs, and 83% feel they are part of something meaningful. This is the second time Franklin has received the honor, also being named a Top Workplace in 2023. (Photo by Franklin)

# Tennessee takes a quantum leap toward emerging technology

By KATE COIL  
TT&C Assistant Editor

Forget Silicon Valley. Tennessee leaders expect American's new Quantum Valley to be in the Volunteer State.

Leaders in Tennessee's quantum industry – including University of Tennessee Chattanooga (UTC) Quantum Center Director Dr. Rick Mukherjee, EPB of Chattanooga Vice President of Government and Community Relations Evann Freeman, Tennessee Division of TennCare Chief Information Officer Hugh Hale, and Deloitte US Quantum Cyber Readiness Lead Colin Soutar – discussed how the state is building the future of quantum during the Tennessee Digital Summit panel “The Future Frontier: Realizing Tennessee's Quantum Leap.”

Based on quantum bits or qubits, quantum technology enables computers to process millions of operations simultaneously. Made through quantum engineering, quantum technology – including quantum computers and sensors – can process and calculate at speeds and magnitudes far beyond most average technology, allowing for revolutionary advances in a variety of fields.

Quantum technology can handle models, information loads, and complexities more efficiently, sustainably, accurately, and with greater scalability than modern computers. Tennessee is hoping to be on the forefront of this emerging technology, which is also expected to be a major economic engine.

## BUILDING AN ECOSYSTEM

Mukherjee is the first director of the UTC Quantum Center, which was established 18 months ago. While the UTC Center was the first in the state, Mukherjee said similar centers have opened since.

“Now we have many, many quantum institutions coming up at various universities and private institutions, which is a good thing for Tennessee,” he said. “We want to build quantum education, the quantum workforce, and quantum research throughout the state.”

The FY26-27 state budget commits \$20 million to the future of quantum in Tennessee. In partnership with UTC and Vanderbilt University, EPB of Chattanooga is building the EPB Quantum Center, the nation's first facility to provide commercial access to both a trapped-ion quantum computer and a photonics-based local quantum network. EPB is also a member of the Chattanooga Quantum Collaborative (CQC), which includes other partners such as the UTC Quantum Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL), Quantum Economic Development Consortium (QED-C), the Tennessee Valley Authority, and private sector partner IONQ.

One of the major advances from EPB is opening the next generation of quantum internet. Freeman said the municipal utility expanded from electricity to fiber broadband in 2009. To build on that infrastructure, Freeman said EPB realized some new opportunities through quantum.

“We found if you add the energy component to communications, you have the ability for an electric grid to speak to itself and to learn,” Freeman said. “We patented some of those technologies and worked with ORNL and the Department of Energy (DOE) to see how we could best optimize the electric grid. We have been doing different projects with ORNL on microgridding.”

The result was a partnership between EPB, ORNL, DOE, and quantum services provider Quibitekk. The partnership worked on several award-winning projects and led EPB officials to realize most quantum technology cannot be accessed outside a university or national lab environment.

“From us trying to be a resource to our community similar to how we had put in the fiber initially, we knew that it's not our job to tell you what to do on the internet, but we know if we give you pretty fast internet you can do a lot of cool things,” Freeman said. “It's the same with quantum. We don't really know where that future is going to lead, but it's our job to put in the infrastructure so our community can have this technology and use this technology. We want Tennessee to play a significant role in the nation for quantum technology.”

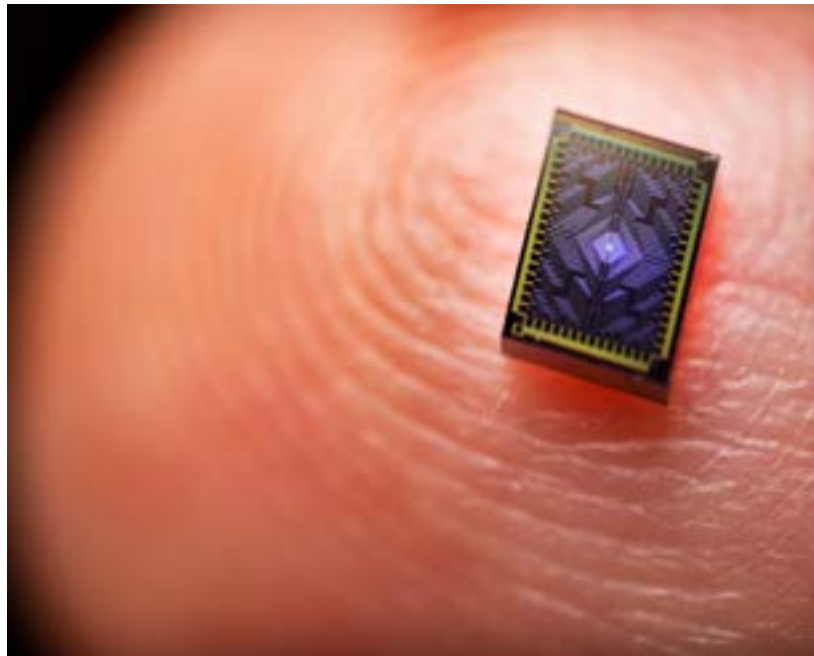
## QUANTUM EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Tennessee's quantum future begins with education.

“I believe that quantum em-



Workers at Chattanooga EPB's quantum networking facility are among those leading the way toward the state's quantum future. Already a key partner in the EPB Quantum Network, EPB has partnered with IonQ to finalize the installation of the Forte Enterprise Quantum Computer and is already working to develop practical applications for securing and optimizing the power grid and training EPB Quantum Computing Fellows to build a local quantum-ready workforce. (Photo by EPB)



An example of a quantum chip scaled alongside a human finger. Despite its small size, this 12-qubit silicon chip provides for faster and more in depth calculations than basic computer microchips. (Photo by Intel)



A quantum chip at Chattanooga's EPB. The public utility is aiming to be on the forefront of quantum, providing an ecosystem that businesses, researchers, and students can use to create the quantum future. (Photo by EPB)

powers individuals and societies,” Mukherjee said. “Education starts with training the future of your society. Society, as a whole, needs to be aware of the possibilities. Instead of Silicon Valley, I think there is a good chance to build the Quantum Valley in Tennessee, which could then lead to the next generation of companies and industries, the Microsofts and Metas of quantum.”

While UTC has several doctoral paths for quantum students, Mukherjee said it is just as important that quantum education is offered at other levels.

“UTC has a quantum certificate program where undergraduates from any major can take these four courses and become quantum trained, he said. “What we do know is that you don't need a doctorate or master's degree to play a major role in the quantum industry. There is going to be a dearth of workforce, and we want to train them at all levels.”

By having this technology available, Freeman said Tennessee will develop future businesses and the future of the workforce.

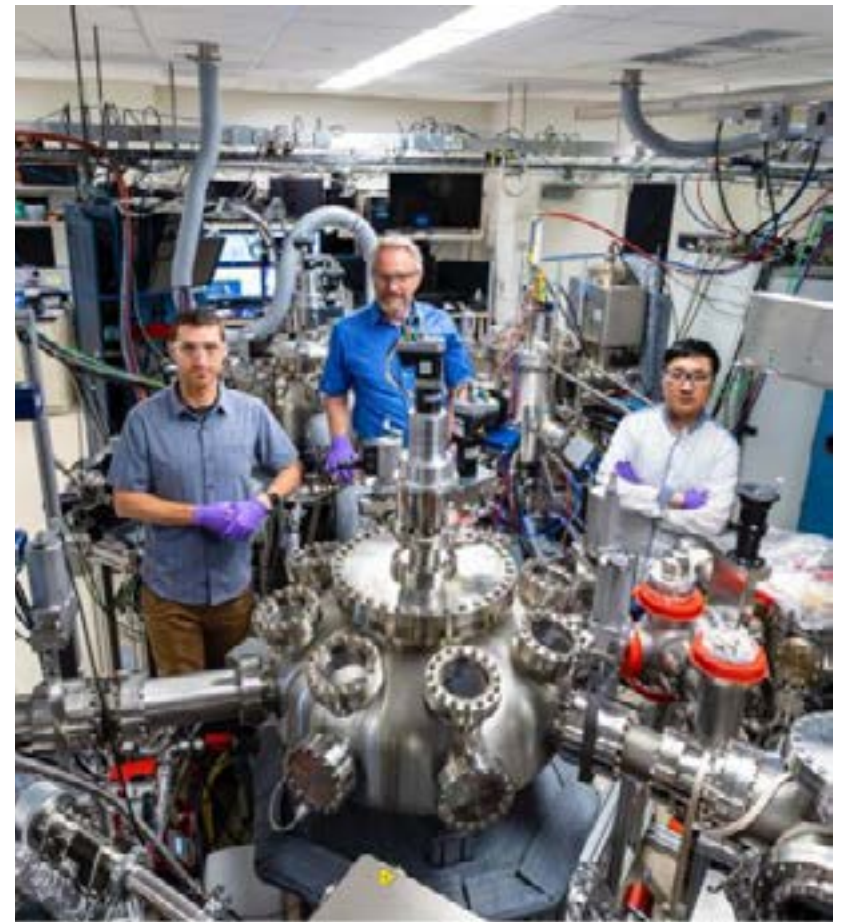
“As we have been going down this road in quantum is how you bring all of the knowledgeable folks together and build an ecosystem that is going to be successful,” he

said. “The economic development and optimization will help companies both save and make money. I also see this as an opportunity for Tennessee, in particular for our elementary kids all up through college, to learn and move with this technology.”

On the research side, Mukherjee said UTC is focusing on three areas: quantum sensing, quantum networking, and quantum information theory in computing. “These are three hot areas where there is a lot of complementary research being done, but we are also very invested in how to take this fundamental knowledge and solve every day, real world problems. We want to see optimization for logistics, finance, healthcare centers to use quantum algorithms, machine-learning, and advanced machine learning.”

In many ways, Mukherjee said artificial intelligence (AI) is paving the way for the quantum future.

“The common consensus of all the experts working on machine learning is that we are not going to have complete quantum machine learning from day one,” Mukherjee said. “That first technology will be hybrid. The AI revolution that we are seeing today is bringing new breakthroughs every day. There



Quantum scientists at work at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, one of the members of the Chattanooga Quantum Collaborative. As part of Tennessee's quantum leap, universities, research institutions, utilities, and private sector businesses are coming together to build the future of the new technology. (Photo by ORNL)

is a lot of treasure to uncover from classical AI, and now the question is becoming how do you integrate that with quantum principles and run those things on a quantum computer to deliver new advances? There are things that could be missed by classical machine learning that quantum can capture. For the next five to ten years, you are going to be seeing hybrid models of quantum machine learning before you get fully fleshed out quantum by itself.”

## RISKS AND REWARDS

Soutar said because quantum is so good at discerning patterns out of massive amounts of data, it also presents unique challenges for cybersecurity. Using quantum technology, it takes much less time and effort to break through the encryptions that protect sensitive data and operations.

“There are a lot of geopolitical concerns around it, standards, and compliances. We are starting to see much more awareness across the financial industry and government. There are steps you can take, but you have to address these risk factors so they don't compromise all of the great things quantum can do with simulation and modelling.”

Hale said that security is important for agencies like TennCare that are protecting decades of data from some of the state's most vulnerable residents. “Quantum can analyze things we can't see today because there is so much data,” Hale said. “There is also a lot of suspicion that data, even though it's encrypted, has already been stolen by a rogue nation or others, but it's still encrypted.

Quantum will make that data no longer encrypted sometime in the future. Our current security measures won't matter as much when someone is running quantum with AI. We need to be ahead of the game before others get there, from a security perspective, to protect ourselves.”

Hale said governments will have to be on the forefront of data protection in the new quantum world.

“You can lock every door you know; what you can't lock is the doors that you don't know exist,” Hale said. “We need a way to defend against that and protect our data. You don't have to have the most security, but you do have to have more security than someone else.”

As algorithms generating random numbers play a major role in encryption, Mukherjee says there is a legitimate fear quantum computers could break current encryption systems.

“It is also true that you can create a more rigorous random number generator using quantum numbers,” Mukherjee said. “There is a lot of research going on about what is the quantum equivalent of classical encryption tactics, such as prime number factorization or credit card encryption. The other side is quantum key distribution. That relates to a concept called entanglement. Because quantum states are so fragile, as soon as someone tries to eavesdrop or intercept the message, it destroys itself immediately. It's almost like the technology in Mission Impossible where Tom Cruise throws the glasses and it destroys the message.”



# PEOPLE

**Ben Baird**, former LaFollette chief of police, died May, 25, 2026, at the age of 80. A LaFollette native, Baird joined the police department as a patrol officer in 1973 after graduating from the Tennessee Law Enforcement Training Academy. He then moved quickly through the ranks, serving as a sergeant, assistant chief, and was finally prompted to chief in 2003. He served as chief of police until his retirement in 2009. In addition to his 36-year career in law enforcement, Baird held a bachelor's degree in history from Cumberland College, teaching elementary grades from 1967 to 1976. When Campbell County High School opened in 1976, he was hired as a special education teacher and taught for 24 years, retiring in 2000 as special education administrator.



Ben Baird

government and the core values that would continue to shape Nolensville. A native of Winchester, Knapper held a bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and then received his nurse practitioner degree from Vanderbilt University. He was also a certified registered nurse anesthetist. Knapper worked at various medical facilities across Middle Tennessee and in multiple states as a traveling nurse.



Charles Knapper

**Nancy Johnson**, former assistant fire chief and city clerk for Orinda, died June 2, 2026, at the age of 67. Johnson served the city for three decades and was married to former Orinda Fire Chief Dusty Johnson, retiring alongside him from their respective roles three years ago. For many of the 23 years Johnson served as Orinda's city clerk, she was the only full-time employee on staff at city hall. She also spent two years as a firefighter before serving as assistant fire chief for 18 years.



Nancy Johnson

**Jeff Damron** has been selected as the city administrator for Tullahoma after having served in the role on an interim basis since March. Prior to being selected as interim city manager, Damron served as the deputy director of Tullahoma Parks and Recreation since June 2022. He also serves as a board member of the Be Yoga Strong Foundation and has held various management roles in the private sector. Damron earned an associate's degree in accounting and business administration from Motlow State Community College and is a certified parks and recreation professional through the National Recreation and Park Association.



Jeff Damron

**Scott Mason** has resigned from his position as city manager of Harriman after five years, stating he feels it is time for a change. Mason joined the city in June 2021, having previously served as principal of Midway High School. Mason said he has no future plans, but does expect to stay in the area.



Scott Mason

**Tim Ellis**, longtime Goodlettsville City Manager and TML District 5 Director, has announced his intention to retire after nearly 40 years of service in local government. Ellis will have served as Goodlettsville's city manager for 15 years at the time of his retirement, which is scheduled for Sept. 30, 2026. In addition to serving as city manager since 2011, he spent four years as Goodlettsville's assistant city manager and three years as the city's director of parks, recreation, and tourism. Prior to coming to Goodlettsville in 2003, Ellis spent more than 14 years as director of parks, recreation, and cultural arts for the city of White House and nearly three years as recreation supervisor for the city of Springfield.



Tim Ellis

**A.J. McKinney** has been named the first-ever sports tourism business development manager with the Gallatin Economic Development Agency, which is a division of the city of Gallatin. The new position was created to promote the city as a premier destination for sports tourism, regional tournaments, and visitor-driven economic growth. McKinney most recently served as a senior strategy consultant with Accenture, where he led large-scale business strategy and growth initiatives across multiple industries, including sports and entertainment. He holds a master's degree in business administration from the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School and a master's degree in sports business management from the University of Alabama.



A.J. McKinney

**Charles Knapper**, the first mayor of Nolensville after the town was reincorporated, died May 29, 2026, at the age of 74. After the referendum that reincorporated the town in 1996, Knapper was elected the first mayor and served from 1996 to 2006. During these formative years, he helped establish the foundation of local

**Brian Ramsey** has been named the interim city manager of Bristol, following the departure of

## Livingston, Parsons hold elections

The municipalities of Livingston and Parsons held elections in early June.

### LIVINGSTON

Voters went to the polls for a municipal election in Livingston on June 2.

Incumbents Bruce Elder, David H. Langford, and Bill Linder ran unopposed for the three open seats on the Livingston City Council and were re-elected. Langford 43 Elder 38 Linder 38

### PARSONS

A municipal election was held in Parsons on June 4.

Incumbent Tim Boaz defeated challengers Gregory G. Barrett and Jason Harper for the mayoral seat in Parsons. Boaz led the vote count with 207 followed by Harper with 89 and Barrett with 70.



Incumbents J. Kevin Cagle, Madison Cagle, Marty Carrington, William Dale Reynolds and Deborah Walker will be joined by newcomers Joseph Fisher and Clinton Brasher after fending off challenger Thomas Tharpe for the seven open alderman seats. Fisher and Brasher will take the

seats previously held by John Odle and Linda Taylor, who did not seek re-election to the board.

J. Cagle led the vote tally with 290 followed by Fisher with 281, Carrington with 237, Brasher with 234, M. Cagle and Reynolds both with 224, Walker with 213, and Tharpe with 157.

## Nashville announces changes to law department

Leadership changes are coming to Metro Nashville's Department of Law.

Mayor Freddie O'Connell announced current director Wallace "Wally" Dietz will retire from his position in July 2026. Tyler Yarbrow has been tapped to succeed Dietz as the department's director.

Dietz has headed the law department since 2021. Prior to that, he spent four decades at the Nashville-based law firm Bass, Berry & Sims where he chaired the Compliance and Government Investigations Practice Groups.

Early in his career, he served as a legislative and media aide to U.S. Senator Jim Sasser and as a judicial clerk for U.S. District Judge Thomas A. Wiseman, Jr. He received the Nashville Bar Association's Liberty Bell Award in 2002 for his



Wally Dietz



Tyler Yarbrow

pro bono work in international human rights.

Yarbrow comes to the city from her current role as managing partner of Dodson Parker Behm and Caparella, PC, where she focuses on employment, probate, business and appellate matters for nonprofit and government cli-

ents. She co-founded the Tennessee Freedom Circle. Prior to entering private practice, she also served as a public defender for Metro Nashville for six years.

Her appointment is expected to go before the Nashville City Council in June for confirmation with her anticipated start date being July 16.

City Manager Kelli Bourgeois to move closer to family in Minnesota. Ramsey joined the city in 2022 as director of engineering and was then promoted to his most recent role as director of public works in 2024. Prior to coming to the city, Ramsey spent 21 years with the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT), including roles as a construction engineer and district maintenance supervisor of TDOT's eastern-most counties. Additionally, he served 11 years in the Tennessee National Guard, managing in-air and on-ground personnel and equipment. Ramsey holds a bachelor's degree in civil and environmental engineering from Tennessee Tech.



Brian Ramsey

**Hailey Russell** is the new town recorder for Farragut. A certified municipal clerk, Russell is also in the process of becoming a certified municipal manager. She comes to Farragut from the town of Louisville where she served as an administrative assistant and performed duties similar to those of town recorder. A native of Friendsville, Russell attended Pellissippi State Community College before beginning a



Hailey Russell

healthcare career at the University of Tennessee Medical Center (UTMC). Helping to plan community events at UTMC inspired her to seek out work in the municipal field.

### Norm Sugarman

former alderman for Kingston, died June 8, 2026, at the age of 90. A graduate of the Sewanee Military Academy, he served in the Tennessee Air National Guard's 151st Fighter-Interceptor Squadron during the Berlin Crisis. Upon his return to the U.S. from Germany, he worked at the Oak Ridge X-10 and K-25 sites, retiring from the purchasing department after 35 years of service. During his retirement, he served as both a reserve police officer and on the Kingston City Council.



Norm Sugarman

### Jim Thomas

has been named the interim leader of the University of Tennessee's Institute of Public Service (IPS) while a 14-member committee conducts a search for permanent leadership. Thomas will take on the role beginning Oct. 1, following the retirement of current director Dr. Herb Byrd III.



Jim Thomas

Thomas previously retired from IPS in 2017, where he served as executive director of the Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) from 2011 to 2017. Thomas' spent 30 years in public service, beginning with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture from 1978 to 1985, returning to the public sector. From 1993 to 1999, he was a member of Goodlettsville's Planning and Zoning Commission and then elected as a commissioner for the city, serving from 1996 to 1999. That year, he became Goodlettsville's assistant city manager and served until 2004, when he was appointed city manager. In 2011, he left his role as city manager to head MTAS.

### Candace Whitt

has been selected as the new grant procurement accountant for Farragut. In this role, she'll ensure that the town's grants, contracts, expenditures, and financial records meet all legal requirements. Whitt comes to Farragut from Blount County government where she worked as a buyer and purchasing specialist. A certified professional public buyer, she holds an associate's degree from Gadsden State Community College and a bachelor's in merchandising and buying operations from Jacksonville State University.



Candace Whitt



# Even with extended deadline, online ADA requirements create challenges for cities

ADA, from Page 1

municipal departments. However, VanWormer said she is fortunate to have a team, because many small municipalities either have a single IT employee or outsource this work.

“This is a very big lift for one-person shops,” she said. “It’s expensive, very hard to do, and many of these one-person shops are still trying to upgrade servers that are 12 years old.”

One constant VanWormer said with many municipal IT officials is concern that compliance requires more money and more staff or time than they can currently allot.

“One of the challenges I think we will see in Tennessee for local governments is the budget isn’t there and we don’t have the person power to do this sort of thing,” she said. “We also now have to go to our boards and say we need a lot of money to meet all these new obligations. One of the challenges we face as local governments is getting the funding in place and the people in place for these changes.”

To help with the issue, VanWormer said she and a dozen other municipal IT directors have created a roundtable that provides networking, expertise, resources, and support to help guide cities through these new obligations.

“One of the things we’ve started doing is asking each other what they need or what we can help with,” she said. “It may also be different from different perspectives how you get that budget or person power in place. It’s such a big task, and it’s hard to figure out when to start – especially when you have 56 other hours a week you have to spend on other things. There is so much value in having a network of people who can come in and help when things go bad. That network doesn’t cost you anything but time and energy.”

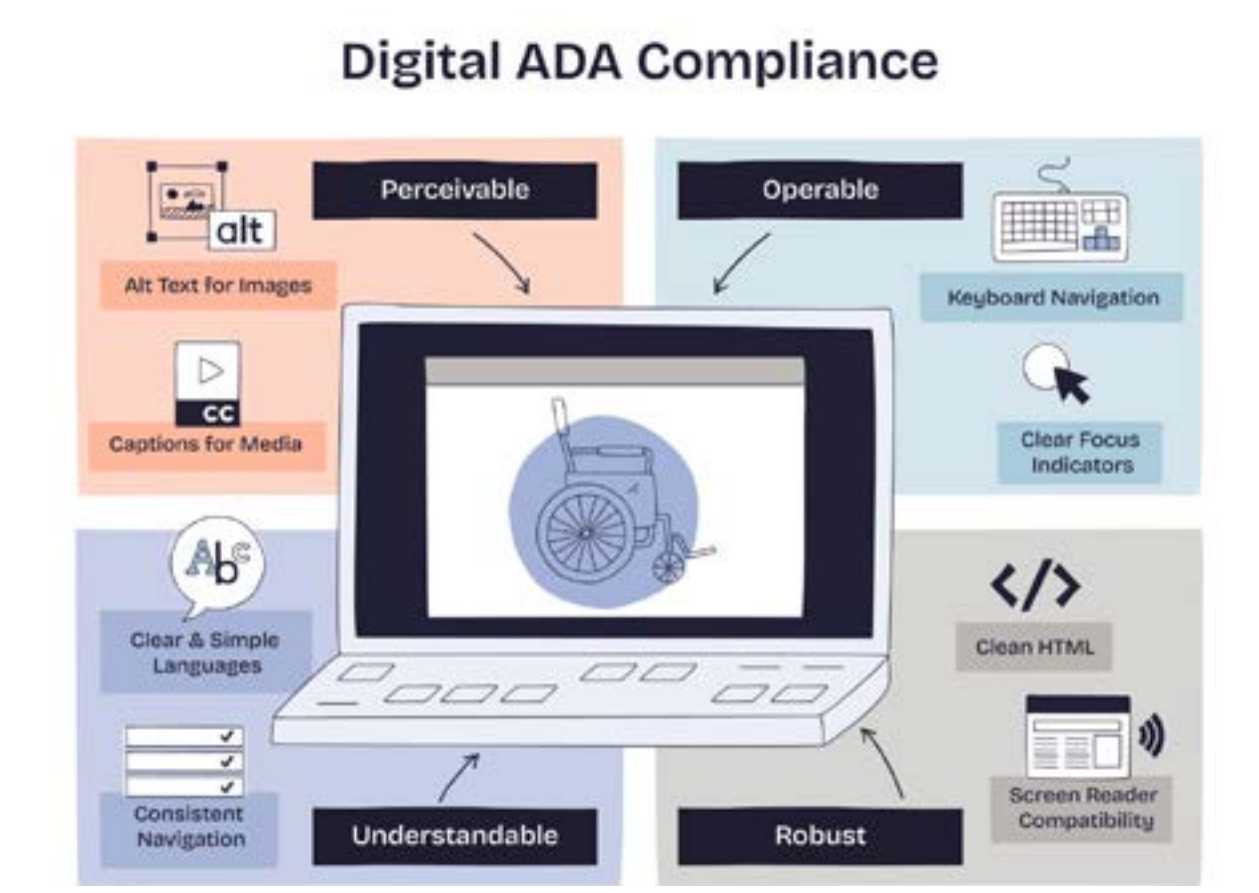
VanWormer also suggested municipalities should look at the free tools available online to help with the compliance process to achieve some easy successes.

### STARTING THE PROCESS

When the state began readying for compliance, Romero said she brought together a steering committee comprised of legal officials, communications personnel from each department, and members of the state’s IT department.

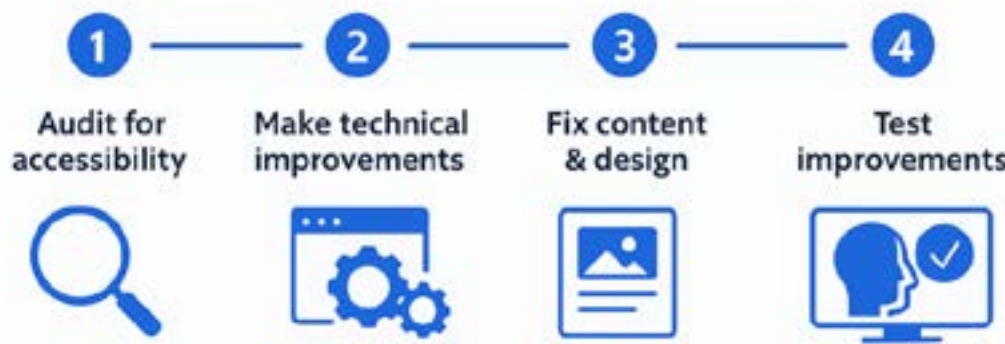
She advised that local governments might want to create an “ADA champion” from each department who communicates between that main steering committee and their department and provides input.

Romero said funding was another major concern on the state level. As they were waiting for funding, Romero said state officials created a roadmap to be in a better position when funding came through.



The four key goals for the new digital ADA compliance for government spaces online include ensuring all content is perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust for use by assistive technology. This includes technology designed to assist with reading, navigation, and other types of access. (Photo by Adobe)

## How to Implement ADA Compliance on Your Website



Numerous free websites and services are offering accessibility audits that can help officials discern what changes they need to make, both technical and visual, to meet with the new standards. Cities may also want to work with local residents with accessibility needs to help guide the process. (Photo by Bluehost)

“The first step of that roadmap was to get training, and there is a lot of training out there that is free to agencies. Learn as much as you can about compliance. Our second step was to get our ADA agency champions to learn who is sitting at the table in their agency, so they can know who they need to deliver that information immediately. The third step was pulling all of our contracts and reviewing the ADA language in all those contracts. You need to know what your contracts state now and what kind of language they need. We then created an inventory of all our online presences, and fifth was to get analytics. These first five steps can all be done without money.”

Romero also networked with officials in technology departments and ADA coordinators for other states to see what they were doing on a similar statewide level. Tennessee created a digital accessibility coordinator modeled on other states because those states seemed to be ahead of the curve in compliance. Eddings was hired into that coordinator position and said she came to the role from a user-focused background in the private and government sectors. “In that line of work, your goal is making things easier to use and more efficient. In the private sector, accessibility is looked on as an investment. If your product is easier

for people with disabilities to use, that opens your product up to a broader market. Accessibility also isn’t just for people with disabilities. Things that benefit those with disabilities benefit everyone across the board. Our end-users are the people of the state of Tennessee.” In addition to citizens using online services, Eddings said it is also essential that employees who have to implement accessibility changes, or be mindful of accessibility in what they post online, are given guidance on how to do so. “A key user group is state agencies and state employees, because not only are we working on making our products accessible, we have

also focused on what those processes look like in order to make those products accessible. That has to be achievable for the people who need to implement these procedures into their workflow. They need guidance that breaks that down into plain language they understand. They need to know what accessibility looks like in the role they have, whether that it is as a designer, procurement, or in IT.”

### IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES

The ruling is the first to set nationwide technical standards for state and local governments and the first ruling on the ADA in digital spaces. It applies to any websites, mobile apps, and social media sites operated by or on behalf of local governments, public schools, public libraries, municipal courts, and any municipal police and parks and recreation departments. For example, an outside developer designing a town website must comply with the design standards set forth in the DOJ ruling.

Eddings recognized the process can seem overwhelming, but it can be helpful to review the guidelines, break down the guidelines into more manageable segments, and handle the most important pieces first. Eddings said those most important are:
 

- Websites
- Social media content
- Online documents
- Public live-streamed meetings

Additionally, Eddings said governments can use this time to audit spaces they have online, such as knowing how many websites, social media accounts and profiles, or apps the city manages.

“One thing with Title II is that, if certain criteria is met, you may not be required to remediate,” she said. “You can then archive those things. There may be other things you can delete completely. You can help streamline your content and delete clutter online. You can also potentially reduce the amount of remediation you have to do if you are getting rid of anything you aren’t obligated to have. That can make the workload significantly more manageable. What is left after you delete or archive is what you focus on.”

Eddings said it is essential to also remember there are actual human beings on the other end of the compliance requirement.

“You have to keep it grounded in empathy and human-centered,” she said. “It’s not checking a box for compliance; we’re doing this because it’s centered in people.”

Anyone interested in joining the IT roundtable can contact VanWormer at [sarah.vanwormer@brentwoodtn.gov](mailto:sarah.vanwormer@brentwoodtn.gov).

## No loan is too large or too small



The city of Jasper has used TMBF programs nine times since 1997. The latest is for a note issue, which closed in May, to finance a new pavilion in the town’s park. From left to right: Jasper Mayor Jason Turner, TMBF Representative Steve Queener, and Jasper City Recorder Paula Turney.



The city of Humboldt has used TMBF programs eight times since 1990. The latest was for a school system refunding bond issue which closed in May. Pictured are Humboldt Mayor Arthur Boykin (seated), Humboldt CFO/Treasurer Alicia Pigue, left, and TMBF Marketing Representative Justin Hanson.



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# TML congratulates 2026 Achievement Award winners

## Excellence in Economic and Community Development - Paris

As many municipalities balance the desire to attract national retailers while also supporting home-grown small businesses, the city of Paris has implemented a comprehensive and coordinated community and economic development strategy that brings together retail recruitment, downtown revitalization, tourism development, and infrastructure investment under one framework.

For developing strategies that benefit small local businesses and big box retail centers, the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is pleased to honor Paris for Excellence in Economic and Community Development.

The strategy laid out by Paris officials incorporates three core pillars: economic growth, revitalization and sustainability, and destination-based tourism.

By incorporating these goals, city leaders are making economic development decisions that are intentional, collaborative, and align private development, public investment, and community identity. These values are applied as an overarching strategy that promotes economic development but not at the cost of what makes Paris unique.

By employing strategic recruitment efforts, the city has attracted several new commercial investments that expand consumer access and the local tax base.

The Paris Crossings Shopping Center is a significant retail development that includes nationally-recognized brands like Hobby Lobby, Ulta, TJMaxx, PetSmart, Rack Room Shoes, Bath & Body Works, Aldi, Burlington, and Five Below. New food and beverage options in the city include Zaxby's, Starbucks, 7

Brew, and Scooter's. Combined, these major retailers have made Paris a regional shopping and dining destination, bringing in outside tax revenue to benefit local residents.

Additionally, the city navigated the annexation process to bring new commercial developments into the city limits, leveraging the benefits of access to municipal services to recruit key commercial investments.

The city has also developed a data-informed recruitment strategy for retail in partnership with the Tennessee Retail Alliance, using Placer.ai to analyze traffic patterns, consumer behavior, and demographic data to create personalized recruitment packets for prospective retailers and better target businesses in line with local needs and values.

Digital branding and communications have helped modernize the city's marketing strategies and outreach, allowing for clearer communication to developers about opportunities and economic data.

The city partnered with the Paris-Henry County Industrial Committee, the Paris Board of Public Utilities, and the Paris-Henry County Chamber of Commerce to ensure consistent communication across organizations.

These efforts complement a strong focus on supporting existing businesses, particularly those rooted within Paris' historic downtown district.

The local small businesses that belong to the Downtown Paris Association serve as both economic engine and the cultural centerpiece that draws so many to the community.



While officials with the city of Paris have made concerted efforts to bring in new national retailers to the community, they haven't done so at the cost of the unique, vibrant downtown businesses that give Paris its core identity. (Photo by Paris)

In working with these businesses, Paris' Public Works Department maintains a high standard of cleanliness and upkeep while the Paris Police Department provides a dedicated patrol officer to maintain downtown Paris as vibrant, charming, and safe for customers.

The city participated in the TNECD Downtown Improvement Grant program to help downtown property owners maintain their properties.

The exterior improvements have restored historic features, enhanced curb appeal, increased foot traffic, improved property values, and instilled confidence in downtown business owners. Preserving the unique character of downtown also enhances a sense of community and attracts tourists looking for one-of-a-kind experiences.

Tourism is another key piece of economic development for Paris. Eiffel Tower Park attracts more

than 465,000 annual visitors for its Eiffel Tower replica, splash pad, and community programming. Events and seasonal programming like the World's Biggest Fish Fry, Tennessee River Jam, Spooktacular, the Easter Egg Hunt, Concerts in the Park, Splashing Through the Snow, and Glow Over Paris help reaffirm a sense of community identity while also drawing visitors who spend money at local businesses while they are in town.

## Excellence in Energy Efficiency and Conservation - Maryville



Officials flip the switch in a ceremony to officially open the first of three new solar farms in the Maryville area. In addition to helping local companies keep their green pledges, the farms will have a positive impact on power bills for local residents. (Photo by DENSO)

By leveraging private and public investment, the city of Maryville has worked with local energy companies and businesses to build a solar farm that will ensure clean energy generation from one of its leading manufacturers and renew commitments from area businesses to the community.

In recognition of its commitment to fostering development supported by green energy technologies—now and in the future—the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is proud to honor Maryville for Excellence in Energy Efficiency and Conservation.

In August of last year, officials with the city of Maryville joined representatives from the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Nashville-based solar company Silicon Ranch, and local manufacturer DENSO to ceremonially “flip the switch” on the first of three major solar energy farms in the area.

The project was a culmination of a multi-year public-private partnership that created 80 jobs and aligns green energy technology priorities for the city, one of its major employers, and local utilities.

Located on DENSO's campus, the 12.82-acre energy in-

frastructure project will produce energy for DENSO's operations and support the local power grid.

The site includes more than 4,000 solar panels and is expected to generate approximately 3,400 MWh of energy per year. That's enough energy to power 187 homes.

DENSO officials say the project celebrates the company's 35th anniversary in the community and takes them one step closer to their goal of carbon neutral production by 2035.

“We appreciate the city of Maryville, Silicon Ranch, and TVA for sharing this commitment with us and look forward to continuing to work together to advance renewable energy in East Tennessee,” said Chuntao Ye, President of DMTN and Business Leader of the DENSO North America Peace of Mind Business Group.

For Maryville residents, the project will also bring lowered electricity bills and more sustainable energy sources by diversifying the city's energy portfolio.

“This solar energy asset is another example of the next-level innovation we've come to expect from our community's largest manufacturer and employer — DENSO,” said Maryville Mayor

Andy White. “Our partnership with TVA, DENSO, and Silicon Ranch in this effort highlights our commitment to a cleaner, more sustainable future. Providing quality utility infrastructure and affordable service to the residents, businesses, and industries we serve every day remains our top priority.”

A second solar farm has also come online in Maryville in another public-private partnership between the city, Silicon Ranch, and the Chroma Energy Group.

This 1.8-megawatt solar array in Maryville was built by 18 local community members and is already feeding into the Maryville Electric Department's grid, generating savings for the city and residents from its Mint Road location.

A third solar farm is in the works, showcasing Maryville's ongoing commitment to providing clean, efficient, and cost-saving services.

A member of the Tennessee Renewable Energy and Economic Development Council since 2008, Maryville has become a model city for showing how promoting renewable energy goes hand-in-hand with economic development.

## Excellence in Public Works - Gatlinburg



Built on land that had been decimated in the 2016 wildfires, Gatlinburg's new public works complex has restored a valuable corridor of the city and provided opportunities for inter-department collaboration. (Photo by Gatlinburg)

From paving streets and clearing debris to maintaining a fleet of vehicles — including the city's iconic trolleys — the new Gatlinburg Public Works Complex brings together the departments that keep one of Tennessee's premier destinations running seamlessly.

In recognition of its investment in vital public works and its commitment to strengthen operational excellence, disaster recovery, and community revitalization, the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is proud to honor Gatlinburg for Excellence in Public Works.

Like many buildings throughout the city, Gatlinburg's Street Department facility was damaged during the devastating 2016 wildfires.

As part of the strategy for recovery from the disaster, the city began to acquire surrounding properties that were also damaged.

With the land secured, planning began on a \$15.6 million cohesive public works complex to bring the Utilities Maintenance, Building Maintenance, and Street Departments, customer service center, and trolley fleet together in one place.

The location also houses millions of lights used each year for the city's Winterfest, an indoor wash facility for city vehicles, and storage options for various department needs.

As a result of this centralization, efficiency has increased in all departments with communication, coordination, and response

times improving. Staff can now collaborate, share resources, streamline workflows, and ensure efforts are not duplicated.

A former bank building on the site was renovated to provide residents with a convenient, accessible destination for bill payments and other financial transactions, featuring a drive-thru window and after-hours drop box. This has reduced congestion at other city offices and improved customer experience.

The fleet shelter and vehicle wash enhance the longevity of city equipment and have reduced maintenance needs. The modern infrastructure of the new campus has also cut operational costs of maintaining other aging buildings while the purpose-built infrastructure reduces the need for future capital expenditures.

The complex has become a symbol of post-wildfire revitalization and land stewardship. From a practical standpoint, it was designed to centralize critical public works functions and resources that can be called upon during future disasters.

And through strategic acquisitions, the city turned an area left blighted by disaster into an aesthetically pleasing, well-maintained property in a key location.

The project has turned adversity into opportunity by investing in infrastructure that supports residents and tourists, enhancing visual and service quality, and providing convenient, citizen-focused services in an accessible area.

# TML congratulates 2026 Achievement Award winners

## Excellence in Overall Municipal Governance - McMinnville

Known as the Nursery Capital of the World, officials in McMinnville know that managing a growing city requires planning, organization, and occasionally tough decisions.

For their comprehensive Municipal Governance Transportation Initiative and success in modernizing and streamlining operations to deliver measurable public value, the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is pleased to honor McMinnville for Excellence in Overall Municipal Governance.

McMinnville officials wanted to align strategic planning, budgeting, organizational structure, economic development, and public communication into a unified and performance-driven system based on services providing value to the public. To this end, the city set six goals:

- Transitioning to structurally balanced, performance-informed budgeting, supported by ClearGov to enhance transparency
- Organizational restructuring to create a Tourism & Marketing Department and integrating tourism into the city's broader economic development strategy
- The first full, comprehensive update and digitization of the municipal code since 2006 to improve access and administrative efficiency
- Consistent public communication tools, including the Weekly Wrap Up newsletter and Inside McMinnville video series
- Implementation of a program called Living Our Values, integrating employee recognition with direct public feedback, while promoting organizational values
- Strategic alignment of tourism, infrastructure, and economic development through a unified planning framework

As a result of implementing these strategies, the city has

ensured that decisions, financial resources, and community investment are maximized for long-term impact.

The initiative has seen the city increase budget execution from 85-90% to 98%, eliminated duplication of services, improved internal efficiencies by reducing outdated or inconsistent regulations, and strengthened cross-department collaboration.

The city also launched the Living Our Values program, which functions as a real-time performance management system for municipal employees.

The program offers peer-to-peer recognition aligned with the city's core service values, enables public feedback through postcards and open communication channels, and allows citizens to recognize employees who go above and beyond the call of duty. Within the first quarter of implementation, the program recognized 39 city employees, demonstrating strong engagement and showcasing the valuable contributions of municipal staff.

Citizens now have more transparency in how their government is run through consistent public communications, accessible data, multi-channel public feedback systems, advanced quality-of-life initiatives, and a continuous feedback loop between citizens and city operators that has led to numerous improvements.

Using a data-driven model, the city has also improved its tourism initiatives by focusing on accommodation, grants, infrastructure, connectivity, and engagement.

This allowed the city to launch its first strategic plan for tourism and use digital platforms and target marketing campaigns to prioritize high-value demographics.

By ensuring that data backs decisions, the city has seen 12.4% growth in average monthly visitors over the past year with total trips increasing by 7.7% and more than 619,700 overnight stays in local



McMinnville officials knew they wanted to align their strategic planning, budgeting, organizational structure, economic development, and public communication into a unified and performance-driven system based on services providing value to the public. (Photo by McMinnville)

hotels in one year.

Currently, visitors account for 32% of all restaurant spending, an 11% increase.

Money generated from tourism benefits the local business community and, in turn, helps fund quality-of-life enhancements for citizens. Revenues from sales and consumption taxes have stabilized the local tax base and allowed reinvestment in the community

including:

- Approximately \$100,000 in annual solid waste savings
- Leverage for state, federal, and nonprofit grants to improve parks, river access, and connectivity
- Increase in long-term fiscal stability through diversified revenue streams
- Maintenance of an A1 credit rating

Ultimately, the goal is not just to improve services. The aim is to create a sustainable model where governance, economic vitality, and quality of life reinforce one another and work together to create a more resilient and stronger municipality, poised for future growth and new opportunity.

## Excellence in Parks and Recreation - Newport



Newport's scenic downtown riverwalk and park are part of what draw tourists to the area, but the devastation of Hurricane Helene threatened those amenities. By partnering with the Tennessee Department Agriculture Division of Forestry, the city worked to restore the streambank. (Photo by Newport)



By partnering with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture Division of Forestry to restore the streambank, Newport was able to leverage specialized expertise, technical guidance, and resources that may not have otherwise been as readily accessible at the local level. With no need to engage third-party consultants on the work, Newport was also able to save time and money on the project while maintaining high standards for environmental restoration and sustainability. (Photo by Tennessee Department of Agriculture)

In the wake of Hurricane Helene, the city of Newport was faced with numerous challenges to repair the damage, restore infrastructure for citizens, and conserve the natural environment locals and visitors enjoy.

As part of the recovery process, the Newport Parks and Recreation Department engaged with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture Division of Forestry on a streambank restoration project that strengthened bonds within city government and is now a model for conservation, education, and community resilience.

For their commitment to environmental restoration and conservation while also improving recreation opportunities for residents, the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is pleased to honor Newport for Excellence in Parks and Recreation.

Both Newport's flagship Newport City Park and the Newport Riverwalk are located alongside the Pigeon River, which bisects the city.

In the wake of Helene, the river overflowed its banks, flooding the area. When the waters receded, there were notable changes to the streambanks that put properties along the river – including the park – at further risk.

By partnering with the Division of Forestry to restore the streambank, Newport was able to leverage specialized expertise, technical guidance, and resources that may not have otherwise been as accessible locally.

With no need to engage third-party consultants on the work, Newport was also able to save time and money on the project while maintaining high standards for environmental restoration and sustainability.

The Newport Parks and Recreation Department looked within the ranks of the city's other departments to provide labor and know-how, streamlining implementation of the project, reducing duplication of work, and ensuring that restoration strategies were

effective for everyone involved.

This also led to new camaraderie among employees from different departments.

The project focused not only on stabilizing the banks of the Pigeon River but also on addressing underlying environmental concerns.

Beyond visual improvements, it aimed to enhance water quality, restore natural areas, and make recreation spaces safer, more accessible, and more resilient for residents and visitors.

The project will also save the city money in the long run, implementing erosion control and restoration strategies proactively instead of waiting for another disaster.

The project reduces future maintenance costs, prevents further land loss, and avoids expensive repairs using native vegetation and sustainable practices.

A small community designated as economically at-risk, Newport has shown that bringing together the right people, leveraging resources, and prioritizing collaboration, fiscal responsibility, and community well-being can set communities up for success.

Although Newport leaders were strained by the toll the recovery, they discovered stepping out of their comfort zone, trusting in state partners, and believing in the future and resilience of their community enabled them to achieve goals that once seemed beyond reach.

The restoration project has reshaped the way Newport thinks about collaboration, stewardship, and its role providing services to the public.

It has renewed the commitment of city employees to face challenges, work together, and deliver success previously thought impossible.

The Division of Forestry has also used Newport as a model for what small cities can accomplish, even in the face of unprecedented tragedy.

# TML congratulates 2026 Achievement Award winners

## Excellence in Fire Services - Cookeville

Through partnership with other first responders and local health care providers and advocacy groups, the Cookeville Fire Department has implemented a program aimed at ensuring residents suffering mental health crises receive the services they need.

In recognition of the Cookeville Fire Department's Cookeville Community Response (CCR) program, the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is pleased to honor the city for Excellence in Fire Service.

Too often, emergency calls involving individuals suffering from mental health issues end with the individual either in jail or an emergency room, rather than receiving the services and support they need. Partnering with the Cookeville Police Department, city of Cookeville, NAMI Tennessee, and Volunteer Behavioral Health Services, the Cookeville Fire Department is part of an innovative co-responder initiative designed to address mental health and substance-related calls for service.

The CCR program pairs a licensed mental health clinician with a fire department-based EMT to respond to non-violent behavioral health incidents, providing a specialized and compassionate alternative to traditional emergency responses.

The fire department-based model is the first of its kind in the region, with an approach that is uncommon even among larger municipalities.

By incorporating Crisis In-

tervention Team (CIT) training and maintaining in-house CIT instructors, Cookeville has expanded behavioral health response capabilities across all emergency personnel—not just CCR teams.

This model increases local government efficiency by ensuring the right resources are dispatched to incidents.

The coordinated, dispatch-driven triage model ensures non-violent behavioral health incidents are diverted from the traditional EMS and police response, reducing duplication of services.

The on-scene access to a trained mental health professional provides individuals with assessment, de-escalation, stabilization, and direct connection to community resources such as treatment programs, housing assistance, and other services.

The strong emphasis on follow-up care also ensures continuity of support.

In addition to freeing law enforcement from time-intensive behavioral calls, the program has reduced jail admissions and incarceration costs, decreased EMS transports, lessened repeat emergency calls, and improved response availability.

The program breaks the cycle of repeated emergency system utilization, particularly for individuals with complex challenges, while providing a humane, specialized, and compassionate approach focused on outcomes to benefit individuals and the community.



**Above:** The ability to divert calls that require crisis intervention to a dedicated team is saving lives in Cookeville, both by giving those in crisis the help they really need and freeing up police and other emergency responders to handle other issues. Since starting in 2024, the co-responders program has handled 400 calls, connecting individuals in need to community resources. (Photo by Cookeville Fire Department)



**Left:** Members of the Cookeville Fire Department's CIT team, other city officials, local partners, and stakeholders recently gathered to discuss the response program. (Photo by Cookeville)

## Excellence in Police Services - Nolensville

Through strategic grant funding, data-driven initiatives, and a strong community-centered philosophy, the Nolensville Police Department shows how a small agency can deliver large-scale, measurable impact while maintaining fiscal responsibility and preserving the character of its community.

For their commitment to public safety, effective policing strategies, and deliberate and sustained efforts to build community trust, the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is pleased to honor Nolensville for Excellence in Police Services.

As Nolensville has grown into a thriving suburban hub, the Nolensville Police Department has remained grounded in its commitment to personalized, community-focused policing. The department operates on the principles that public safety is a shared responsibility, trust is built through consistent engagement and transparency, and every individual is to be treated with dignity, respect, and understanding.

The department has directly contributed to residents' safety and quality of life by strengthening relationships. A new computer-based simulation training system allows officers to safely engage in realistic, high-risk scenarios. As a result, officer confidence and preparedness for complex encounters has increased, outcomes can be improved, and de-escalation has been prioritized over use-of-force. This initiative was funded through a \$217,000 U.S. Department of Justice COPS Office Grant.

The department is developing a comprehensive and forward-thinking Engagement Program, designed in

collaboration with the community. This includes specialized officer training on autism spectrum disorders and sensory issues, as well as de-escalation strategies tailored for people with communication challenges. The community meet-and-greet portion of the initiative brings together police, fire, EMS, and families. This also provides individuals valuable opportunities to become familiar with uniforms, equipment, and responders as well as build trust in a friendly environment.

The Blue Envelope Program is a voluntary program for drivers with autism or sensory sensitivities that allows them to discreetly communicate their needs during a traffic stop, including emergency contact information for caregivers. In response, residents have expressed strong support for the initiatives, noticing increased comfort and confidence in law enforcement interaction. Officers, too, feel they have gained valuable insight directly from the community, improving real-world response effectiveness.

The department's E-Bike Safety and Traffic Reduction Initiative are direct responses to increasing complaints and serious incidents involving electric bikes. By developing and distributing educational material, community presentations, collaboration with the District Attorney's Office, and targeted enforcement actions, the department saw increased compliance and a documented reduction in serious crashes and community complaints. Additionally, they were able to engage hundreds of residents through direct outreach events. The department also



An officer with the Nolensville Police Department visits a local preschool as part of the numerous community and educational outreach programs the department offers. Recently, the department has focused on crisis response training for officers, training on situations with autistic members of the community, and an outreach and education program on e-bike safety. Many of these programs have been financed through funds leveraged by the department, putting no burden on taxpayers. (Photo by Nolensville Police Department)

with regional partners, allowing surrounding agencies to benefit from Nolensville's knowledge and hands-on experience.

The department has also successfully leveraged external funding to enhance services without burdening taxpayers, including a \$42,000 Tennessee Highway Safety Office grant, which helped reduce total vehicle crashes by 15.93% - well above the 6% target - and teen driver crashes by

15.78% - above the 10% target. The department also earned a Public Entity Partners (PEP) Safety grant to finance equipment for officers.

Internally, the department has worked to invest in the long-term success of employees through structured leadership development programs. Participants take a 40-hour supervisory training course and ongoing professional development focusing on ac-

countability, legal compliance, and ethical leadership. This has improved effectiveness, consistency, and professionalism as well as increased morale and confidence among officers.

By emphasizing strategic innovation, strong fiscal responsibility, data-driven decision making, and deep, meaningful community engagement, the Nolensville Police Department has shown the best of what municipal policing can be.

# TML congratulates 2026 Achievement Award winners

## Innovation Award - Gatlinburg

Known as the gateway to the country's most visited national park, Gatlinburg plays a unique role in outdoor adventure and recreation for millions while also delivering quality-of-life amenities for local residents.

One of the city's more unique municipal initiatives is the Gatlinburg Trout Facility and Trout Program, which produces and stocks approximately 40,000–50,000 trout annually into Gatlinburg's streams while integrating education and conservation into recreation.

For managing a unique program that combines sustainable resource management, public recreation, and experiential education, the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is proud to honor Gatlinburg with the Innovation Award.

Established in the 1980s to ensure a consistent, high-quality fishing experience for residents and visitors, the thriving fishery is also a hands-on learning environment and hosts thousands of visitors annually through school field trips,

tours, and outreach efforts. Guests learn about fish biology, aquatic ecosystems, water quality, and environmental stewardship.

Managing the facility in-house has saved the city money, reducing reliance on third-party suppliers and allowing more control over fish health, size, and the stocking schedule. This enables the city to respond quickly to seasonal demand and environmental conditions.

The program combines fish production, stream management, recreation, and education within the city's Parks and Recreation Department. Staff serve dual roles as technicians and educators, extending the value of city resources without need for additional staff or separate programs.

This initiative maintains Gatlinburg as a premier fishing destination with consistently stocked streams and support for the tourist-driven economy.

The program has directly contributed to visitor spending on fishing licenses and supply purchases.

The program has operated for more than 40 years, demonstrating its long-term suitability, adaptability, and the commitment of the municipality.

The program also requires sustainable management of waterways throughout the city, ensuring that natural assets are accessible and healthy for residents and visitors alike. This has positive impact on the waterways that flow into and out of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Gatlinburg is the only city in Tennessee and one of a handful nationwide that operates a municipal trout facility of this scale.

Most importantly, the knowledge gained through the conservation and environmental practices at the facility has cultivated tens of thousands of future stewards of Tennessee's natural resources, ensuring the unique natural beauty that fuels Gatlinburg's economy and sense of community will be maintained for generations to come.



Fishing in local rivers is one of the many outdoor pursuits that draw people to Gatlinburg. To both ensure anglers enjoy their visit and fish populations are sustainably maintained, the city of Gatlinburg developed its own trout facility, one of few such municipal facilities in the country. (Photo by Gatlinburg)



Approximately 40,000–50,000 trout are stocked in local waterways each year by the city, meaning that municipal employees take an active role in fish production, stream management, and recreation. One of the facility's other major roles is in education, teaching the public - and especially youngsters - about conservation, sustainability, fish biology, aquatic ecosystems, and water quality. (Photo by Gatlinburg)



The gazebo at Clarksburg's town park. (Photo by Clarksburg)

## Small City Progress - Clarksburg

With a population of only 379, the city of Clarksburg shows that even the smallest municipality can make big progress through collaboration and innovation.

As a result of dedicated efforts by municipal officials to create positive momentum with limited resources, the Tennessee Municipal League (TML) is pleased to honor Clarksburg with the Small City Progress Award.

Classified as an economically distressed community, Clarksburg meets challenges head-on. When the current board of mayor and aldermen were elected in 2018, they inherited a nearly 20-year-

old sewer system with financial complications that drew the attention of the State Comptroller and the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation.

The system was originally established to correct an issue with sewage seeping above ground in bad weather, putting the local school at risk of closure. Although the sewer system was necessary, the state requires systems to rely on revenue from customers to avoid a deficit, and rates are set to cover expenses. This structure can put pressure on a small community with limited revenue.

To address the obstacles,

Clarksburg refinanced one of the loans supporting the sewer system at a reduced rate through the Tennessee Municipal Bond Fund. The city also collaborated with Carroll County on an American Rescue Plan grant that addressed critical needs and rehabilitated two sewer pump stations critical to wastewater collection.

With an eye to the future, Clarksburg has also invested in numerous projects to beautify the city and improve accessibility and safety. Police vehicles have been upgraded, new welcome signs and pole banners now greet visitors along Highway 22, and a project to install improved street signage citywide is underway. Thanks to fundraising efforts, Clarksburg purchased new Christmas lights at no cost to the city. Additionally, the Tennessee Department of Transportation awarded Clarksburg a \$940,000 Multimodal Access Grant to install the city's first sidewalks.

One of Clarksburg's most significant projects has been the total renovation and expansion of the city hall, paid for through a USDA Rural Development grant and fundraising efforts. Beyond serving the immediate needs of municipal officials, the city hall provides a community room and kitchen that has become the place in Clarksburg for celebrating birthdays, retirements, baby showers, and other events.

Clarksburg has also taken steps toward building community trust through transparency. Small enough to know citizens personally, city officials regularly meet residents where they are and they keep the city's website updated with the latest agendas, meeting minutes, and financial reports.



Officials and residents with Clarksburg cut the ribbon on the new town hall, which has become an important gathering space for the local community. (Photo by Clarksburg)

# WET Center aims to innovate resilient infrastructure solutions

WET, from Page 1 study based on that data. They learned storm damage costs the state of Tennessee approximately \$600 million annually, not including years when a major incident like the Waverly flood or Hurricane Helene happened.

"We are hoping to reduce that \$600 million impact, because a lot of these places where we see failures are the result of recurring problems," Blackwood said. "We may find underlying issues that aren't obvious and fixing that issue fixes that cycle."

As they reached out to stakeholders with the idea for a center that could simulate flooding to predict how it could wash out roadways, Blackwood said different groups came back to them with other ideas for how the center could be used. This coalesced into a center that would work with five major groups:

- Operators who maintain infrastructures
- First responders looking to practice swift water and flood rescues
- Infrastructure design professionals and engineers
- Public officials who are responsible for infrastructure decision-making and funding
- Students of all ages interested in engineering, civic design, and similar fields

By bringing these groups together, Blackwood said the center will also facilitate knowledge sharing addressing infrastructure issues. Often, Blackwood said operators and infrastructure design professionals and engineers don't come into the field with first-hand knowledge of how an event like a flood can impact their work.

"When I first came out of school, I didn't have the hands-on knowledge I have now," he said. "I learned how important it is to see the thing you are designing for before you make that design. I think the same is true for an operator. It's not so much about what we're doing wrong now, but more about how capable we want our next generation to be. We also want to capture the knowledge from the folks who have it and pass that on."

Blackwood said he hopes the center will also build relationships between public works employees and operators across the state. He said many public works crews consist of the same handful of people, and the center will allow them to expand their knowledge base and network, the way so many other professional networks have done.

Franklin said these public works employees are often not viewed as professionals despite having niche knowledge and skill sets. She hopes the center will help change that.

"The equipment operators don't get the recognition they deserve, quite frankly, because it's a job everyone takes for granted so long as the road is out there and they can get where they want," she said. "We want to recognize them and provide an opportunity for them to feel appreciated, seen, and heard. There is a lot of emphasis in our culture on having a college education, but we can't do this without our on-the-ground operators and those with a college-level education. We are hoping to offer these operators continuing education and certificates so they can take pride in their work."

## ONGOING EDUCATION

By offering these certifications, the center is also hoping to retain these essential members of the workforce.

"Public works is real work," Blackwood said. "It is time we put some professional development pieces around it. Right now, we lose a lot of operators to factory jobs because we don't have the sense of pride around careers like stormwater operators. People think of it as something to do until they find a career instead of as a career itself. Our goal is also to make this training accessible to everyone. We want to find everyone who needs to know this stuff a way to get trained. We want these courses to be valued-added, not another thing to check a box on."

Both Blackwood and Franklin said they want the center to be accessible to even the smallest communities at a reasonable cost.

The center will have the ability to conduct a controlled flood in a 40-foot-wide flume with 10,000 gallons of water per minute for



This rendering shows one of the sandbox features the WET Center will have, that allows officials to get a hands-on experience with infrastructure. Goals of the center include developing new, resilient infrastructure as well as providing education about how water - and flooding in particular - can impact existing infrastructure. Officials hope this will lead to better decision-making and outcomes. (Photo by the WET Center)



While the WET Center will have classroom space, officials are aiming to provide a more in-depth experience as seen in the plans for the overall center site. In addition to demonstrations on water filtration and treatment, visitors will get to learn about how water interacts with infrastructure like roadways and culverts, be able to participate in flooding scenarios, and experiment with techniques that can make their community more resilient. Its location on UT's Lone Oaks Farm also means the center will have access to much more land for activities and exposure to 4-H students. (Photo by the WET Center)

emergency responders to practice rescue situations. At present, much of this training is done on lakes and rivers across the state, which cannot offer the same tightly controlled scenarios as the center.

The center will provide West Tennessee rescue squads a training center closer to home, but Franklin said rescue groups from Sevierville, the Tennessee National Guard, and Memphis Task Force 1 have already expressed support of and interest in how the center can further their hands-on knowledge.

The center's goal for elected officials, like mayors and board members, and officials like city managers and administrators, is to get hands-on experience with what it is like in the field and also understand why it is important to finance proactive projects.

"The decision on whether or not to replace a culvert can be a life-or-death decision," Blackwood said. "Something as innocuous as using metal or concrete can make the difference. I was invited to speak to a group of farmers at this lady's house. The lady who is hosting it pulled me aside and said she lost her husband the previous year. He had gone out to check on the cows during a flood. He parked near a culvert, walked in front of his truck, and the culvert fell in. The truck pinned him and drowned him."

Franklin said she thinks the lessons taught at the center will help municipal leaders understand the real-world consequences of their decisions and explain to citizens why infrastructure projects are necessary when it comes time to finalize the city budget.

"Public officials are elected and change out," she said. "You may not have the same mayor or city councilman or alderman for 30 years. Someone may understand something the next person may not. This will offer them a base-level understanding of stormwater and its actual cost. We also want to get their feet a little wet. We want to put them in a pair of boots, in a sand-



The WET Center logo. While construction has just begun on the center, officials are already getting inquiries from first responders and infrastructure professionals eager for the new opportunities the center will offer. (Photo by the WET Center)

box, and let them feel that water come up around their ankles, then imagine this is where their house is. We want them to understand why budgeting and preparedness are so important. We are a very reactive society; we see a problem and fix it. It takes a lot of forethought to be proactive."

One of the reason Lone Oaks Farm was chosen for the project is because of the existing 4-H STEM camp and center that operates on the property. The site houses between 8,000-10,000 4-H students yearly and includes facilities for meals and lodging. In addition to 4-H students, the center will also be open to field trips for K-12 students across the state as well as offer learning opportunities to higher education students. Blackwood said he hopes the center inspires students to explore potential careers, growing Tennessee's future workforce of operators, planners, engineers, designers, and first responders.

## PLAYING IN THE SANDBOX

While the West Tennessee Water Basin Authority was behind much of the push for the center, this wasn't solely why Lone Oaks Farm was chosen for the location.

"West Tennessee is built on sand; it's a giant sandbox," he said. "It's the home of erosion and insta-

bility. Lone Oaks Farm is a 12,000-acre state facility with lodging and hospitality offerings. It has all the water features we need to look at. It has bridges, culverts, rivers, and lakes. Now we will have a facility where you can stay on site at the center of all these things you want to learn about. It offers an immersive experience."

When the project began, Blackwood said one of the major questions was if the center would only cater to the needs of West Tennessee or if it could help solve problems statewide. While geology and hydrology may be different, across the state and across the country, Blackwood said the root problems the center is looking to address are seen everywhere.

"This is going to be a Southeastern regional and national center," Blackwood said. "The way floods, failures, and erosion happens is common to everyone. We can talk about the processes, and they apply everywhere. We will also be able to generate controlled conditions, so if there is something unique to East Tennessee or another region, we can set up those conditions and create that scenario. Nobody is doing all of this together."

The center's unique "sandbox" features will offer applied learning that cannot be replicated

in a traditional classroom setting, offering education and practical training on water and soil management, infrastructure, and emergency response.

"One of the major things this center will be able to do is simulations," Franklin said. "We will be able to cross-train operators, public officials, and emergency responders together with the same simulation. We will have people from all over the state, so they also get some leadership development as well. We will use the sandbox, the lake, the flume, and the classroom. With 12,000 acres, we can set up simulations throughout the whole farm."

While there are places across the country that offer some similar programs, Blackwood said he is unaware of anywhere else in the U.S. that will bring together the type of people the WET Center is aimed at for the types of projects and education envisioned.

"There are places where you can do rescue training and others where you can play around with heavy equipment," he said. "There are other places I've found that have similar core missions of resilient infrastructure for managing storm water, but not on this level. It's important that this center is both regional and national because the people we train here may respond to national events. We have rescue squads and emergency responders across the state who may be called to other parts of the state or the region. Having that training in-house keeps those training dollars in state and brings in additional revenue. We have made it clear that Tennesseans will be served first, but this is a national center as we have openings available."

## GROWING THE FUTURE

With the 4-H cabins directly facing the future WET Center, both Blackwood and Franklin said they hope experiencing the center will encourage future generations of public works and civil engineering employees.

"I want us to build better things and hold the lines we need to hold on safety and resiliency," Blackwood said. "I want young people to learn they can work on water, roads, infrastructure, and flooding. I want us to produce better prepared people."

Franklin said she wants the center to teach lessons students will remember for a lifetime.

"We want to encourage curiosity and learning through experimentation, not just the classroom," she said. "Our goal for this center is that no one is sitting in a classroom looking at a presentation for more than 15 minutes. They are there to look at models, create, watch things fail, see how they can do it better, and then share their knowledge with each other."

The center is expected to open in 2027, and Franklin said work is underway to develop future classes, experiments, and projects. More information on the facility and the educational opportunities it will offer [may be found on the WET Center's website](#).

## STATE BRIEFS



**Tennessee's unemployment held steady at 3.6% in April 2026, the third month the state has retained the rate.** While the unemployment rate was unchanged since February 2026, the year-over-year unemployment rate increased by 0.1%. The Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD) said nonfarm employment increased 1,200 between April and March, down from the 12,100 jobs gained February and March. The sectors that saw the most job creation in April were construction, durable goods manufacturing and accommodation and food service. Over the past year, employers have added 900 jobs. TDLWD has compiled an economic analysis of the [April 2026 unemployment data](#).

**Housing permits issued by local governments in Tennessee were down 3.3% between 2024 and 2025,** according to new data released by the Tennessee State Data Center (TNSDC). Pulling information from the Census Bureau's [Building Permits Survey](#), TNSDC said permits for single-family homes only declined 1.8% in the year-over-year period and remain steady in the face of [elevated borrowing costs](#). However, multi-family housing permits were down 7.4% in the same period and 45% since their 2021 peak. Last year, 44,863 new housing units were permitted by local governments across the state. Tennessee's county and municipal permit totals can be [viewed on the TNSDC dashboard](#).

**Officials have dedicated Tennessee's newest state park in Meigs County.** Cherokee Trail of Tears State Park preserves and interprets the story of the Cherokee removal across the state in the 1830s. Located at the confluence of the Hiwassee and Tennessee rivers near the historic Blythe Ferry Crossing, the park was formerly the county's Cherokee Removal Memorial Park and marks the location where thousands of Cherokee and Muscogee (Creek) people camped in 1838 while waiting to cross westward. The Tennessee State Parks and the Tennessee Division of Archaeology have worked to ensure that the natural landscape is protected and to preserve the important history of the area. The site is also a recognized interpretive site on the federal Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, which stretches across nine states including Tennessee.

**Tennessee now has a new wine region.** The Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) announced the Nine Lakes of East Tennessee has become a federally recognized American Viticultural Area (AVA), further establishing the state as an emerging leader in the Southeast's wine industry. Centered around Knoxville, the region encompasses all or portions of Anderson, Blount, Campbell, Claiborne, Cocke, Grainger, Hamblen, Jefferson, Knox, Loudon, Monroe, Roane, Sevier, and Union counties. The Nine Lakes region is the fourth AVA in the state, which is defined as a grape-growing region

recognized for unique geography, climate, soils, and elevation – all factors that determine the character of grapes and wine. These designations help producers communicate a wine's origin and give consumers a clearer connection to where their wine is produced. For more information about Tennessee agriculture and the state's wine industry, visit the [TDA Viticulture webpage](#).

**Tennessee ranks among the lowest-earning states in the nation,** according to new [data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Tennessee ranks 44 out of the 50 states and Washington, D.C., with an average hourly wage of \$31.79 and an average working week of 34.7 hours, meaning the average Tennessee takes home \$1,103.11 per week. The national average wage is \$35.66 per hour with the average American working 33.96 hours a week. Washington, D.C., has the highest average hourly wage at \$57.39, followed by Washington state at \$44.15 per hour, and Massachusetts at \$43.45 per hour. Mississippi reports the lowest hourly wage at \$28.98 per hour on average, with Arkansas the second-lowest at \$29.53, and Iowa following at \$30.59.

**Tennessee has become the first state in the nation with its own regulatory framework for nuclear fusion machines.** The technology-neutral approach to fusion regulation taps into more than 60 years of resources and experience from its involvement as a Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Agreement state. The new rules and regulations establish requirements for the licensing of fusion machines and fusion-related activities. Nuclear fusion is the process by which two or more light atomic nuclei combine to form a single, heavier nucleus. This process releases large amounts of energy and is the same reaction that powers the sun and other stars. Type One Energy's commercial site near Oak Ridge is anticipated to be among the first licensees under this new framework and will function as a fusion development campus through projects between the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Tennessee Valley Authority, and the University of Tennessee.

**The Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security is proud to announce that the Tennessee Highway Patrol (THP) has been awarded its Fifth Accreditation Award by the Tennessee Association of Chiefs of Police.** This accreditation is granted for a three-year period, extending through June 2030, and aligns with the agency's CALEA assessment cycle. The award reflects THP's sustained commitment to meeting and exceeding all established standards, including newly adopted or amended requirements set forth by the Professional Standards Committee. The Tennessee Highway Patrol's accreditation underscores the agency's ongoing commitment to delivering exemplary law enforcement services statewide.

## Erwin officials help unveil new state welcome signs



Erwin officials joined Gov. Bill Lee and state tourism officials to unveil the first of the state's new "Welcome to Tennessee" signage program at the Unicoi County Welcome Center. The new signage is part of \$5 million in the state's Fiscal Year 2025-26 budget to promote and showcase scenic beauty along Tennessee's major corridors and marks the first major redesign of the state's welcome sign since 1995. The new signs will be erected at each of the state's welcome centers and at 16 interstate entry points over the coming months. (Photo by Gov. Bill Lee's Office)

## New population estimates for state-shared revenues to be published July 1

The first estimates under the state's [new annual population estimate program](#) will be published on July 1.

The Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD) will publish the figures, which will be based on the estimated population as of July 1, 2025, derived from Vintage 2025 estimates produced by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Under a [statute enacted in 2025](#), those figures – rather than [decennial census counts](#) – will direct the distribution of state-shared revenues.

According to the Tennessee State Data Center (TNSDC), the new yearly adjustment will reflect changes to both the population of each community and the overall state population. That means the proportion of funds that communities will receive each year will also change.

For many communities, the published Census Bureau estimate will serve as the certified population in 2026. However, municipalities and counties that



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**TN** United States Census  
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have had a [special census](#) certified by ECD will see those results integrated into their figures.

Population estimates for the urban services districts in the state's three metropolitan counties are also being finalized. Both adjustments affect the final aggregate population totals that serve as the denominator in per capita

distributions.

[Boyd Center at the University of Tennessee](#) is tasked with preparing population estimates and while TNECD is charged with their review and certification. More can be learned about the new program [on the TNSDC website](#).

## DRA announces grant opportunities for municipalities in West Tennessee

The Delta Regional Authority (DRA) has announced two grant programs available to West Tennessee municipalities.

Funded through the [Community Infrastructure Fund \(CIF\)](#), DRA will make strategic investments toward projects addressing basic public infrastructure, transportation infrastructure and flood-control needs within communities across the DRA's eight-state service area.

Award amounts will range between \$250,000 to \$1 million. The deadline to apply for the 2026 CIF is Aug. 24, 2026.

[States' Economic Development Assistance Program \(SEDAP\)](#), is a funding opportunity supporting economic and community development needs across DRA's eight-state service region.

As one of DRA's main investment tools, SEDAP targets projects addressing basic public and

transportation infrastructure, in addition to workforce and business development needs for communities within DRA's 255 counties and parishes. Awards will range from \$50,000 to \$500,000.

The deadline to apply is July 31, 2026. For questions about the program, email [sedap.cif@dra.gov](mailto:sedap.cif@dra.gov).

To learn more about the programs or to apply, visit [www.dra.gov](http://www.dra.gov).

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# When Federal Resilience Grants Disappear

By **JARED BREY**  
*Governing*

The borough of Highlands, N.J., hugs a small corner of coastal land overlooking Sandy Hook Bay, a short drive from the resorts of Sea Bright and Asbury Park.

Part of Highlands is built into a steep hill that peaks at Mount Mitchill, the highest elevation on the east coast south of Maine, with a resplendent view of the New York City skyline. But most of the homes and businesses are in the low-lying downtown, separated from the bay by nothing but a bulkhead. For decades Highlands has suffered from flooding.

Heavy rains overwhelm the poorly drained hillside developments above the borough and send water rushing downtown, sometimes with such force that it comes spraying out of the inlets onto downtown streets like so many fountains. State Route 36, the primary arterial in Highlands, N.J., is sometimes impassable.

During Superstorm Sandy in 2012, eight feet of water covered Bay Avenue, the main downtown drag. Today many of the homes have been or are in the process of being raised onto stilts, supporting a lively industry of specialty construction contractors.

The people who named Highlands, which is home to about 5,000, got it half right. They could have just as accurately named it Lowlands, or, all too accurately, Highwaters. As Highlands Mayor Carolyn Broullon put it to me one morning in late March, "Either you're on the slope, or you're in the flood plain."

A few years ago, the borough began working with Monmouth Hills, a historic community built above Route 36, to address some of their shared flooding challenges, which stretch back over a century to when Monmouth Hills was first developed.

The plan included building new storm drains, inlets, and pump stations while also constructing new wetlands in an existing human-made canal. One of the major moves was a plan to install a retention basin beneath Kavookjian Field, a baseball and soccer field on Route 36, partway down the slope between the hill and the bay, which would capture stormwater during heavy rains and release it slowly to mitigate flooding downtown. The whole project was estimated to cost about \$16 million.

In 2024, Highlands was told it was going to receive a federal

grant for \$12 million, nearly as much as its entire annual budget, to cover the bulk of the flood mitigation work. The grant was part of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, better known as BRIC, created by Congress in 2018 and administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

In 2025, before Highlands received any of the money, the Trump administration announced it was canceling the BRIC program, calling it "wasteful and ineffective." Without the grant, there was no way Highlands could pay for all the components of the plan. So, even as a group of state attorneys general were suing to have the BRIC program reinstated, Highlands began taking the plan apart and looking for ways to fund it piece by piece. It had little hope of completing the whole thing.

"We assembled it, and now we have to disassemble it," Broullon told me when I first spoke with her by phone in early March. "We have a little bit of whiplash going on."

Conceptually, the BRIC program isn't wholly new. FEMA has made a small portion of its overall recovery funding for disaster areas available for hazard mitigation projects meant to reduce the damage from future storms. But BRIC is unique among federal disaster programs because it's forward-looking, encouraging cities to anticipate future disasters, and because cities don't have to be mid-recovery to qualify.

Since launching in 2020, it has incentivized projects that improve public infrastructure, follow comprehensive hazard mitigation plans and incorporate nature-based solutions, among other priorities.

"The status quo of paying to rebuild after a disaster is no longer tenable," says Joel Scata, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council. He notes that the frequency of major disasters costing \$1 billion or more has risen sharply in recent decades. "I think there's a recognition that there needs to be a better alternative, and that's reducing risk in the first place."

The details of federal funding programs matter because they shape the scope of cities' infrastructure ambitions. Most small cities don't have the local staff capacity or revenue to plan for and fund projects that would help them manage future disasters. In Highlands, Broullon says, borough staff routinely scour a spreadsheet of federal funding opportunities to see what projects they might pursue.

It built its plan for flood reduction in no small part around the priorities of the BRIC program, for example by partnering with a neigh-

boring community to gain points on its application. Many other cities applied for BRIC grants and didn't receive them, suggesting increased demand for the types of projects the program is designed to fund.

"It's really the only way that we can get a lot of projects done, is through that type of funding," she said.

Dozens of other communities are in a similar situation. The state-led lawsuit challenging the cancellation of the BRIC program was ultimately successful, but the fate of the awarded grants is still in question. A judge ruled in December that FEMA had to spend the money that Congress had allocated to BRIC for its intended purpose. The agency said it would comply, and reissued a notice of funding opportunity for the program in March. But it wasn't clear whether it would honor grant awards that hadn't been paid out yet. As of mid-April, Highlands and other communities that had already been awarded grants still weren't sure when they'd get the money, or whether they'd have to reapply.

That type of uncertainty has affected all sorts of federal funding programs over the last year and a half. President Donald Trump began his second term by calling into question federal funding for all types of projects, especially those that are tied to climate change or social policy goals that don't align with his priorities.

His administration announced a freeze on all federal grants last January, intending to target programs related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, before lifting the freeze a few days later. With congressional approval, the administration later pulled back millions in transportation and infrastructure funding, canceling some grants to cities that had been announced and, in some cases, partly awarded.

Trump has taken special aim at FEMA, citing "serious concerns of political bias" within the agency and suggesting that most of its work could be transferred to states. He has clamped down on disaster declarations, which unlock federal funding for recovery and hazard mitigation, in politically uneven ways.

Over the last year, his administration has rejected 77% of disaster requests from states with Democratic leaders while approving 89% of requests from Republican states, according to reporting by Politico.

The uncertainty over specific grant awards comes amid more gradual changes in the federal government's approach to disaster resilience and infrastructure funding, and a broader societal reckoning with the implications of climate change.



**June 20: Oak Ridge**  
[Jackson Square Lavender Festival](#)  
This festival brings together a variety of regional vendors whose goal is to celebrate health, herbs, and the environment.

**June 26: July: Kenton**  
[White Squirrel Festival](#)  
This week full of family-friendly events celebrates Kenton's unique population of white squirrels.

**July 3-4: Jonesborough**  
[Jonesborough Days](#)  
This festival commemorates Jonesborough's history and heritage with a variety of vendors, events, performances, and contests throughout Jonesborough's historic district.

**July 3-4: Smithville**  
[55th Annual Fiddlers' Jamboree](#)  
The official jamboree and crafts festival for the state of Tennessee features 35 music and dance categories, streets full of hand-made crafts, and food booths galore.

**July 10-12: Ripley**  
[Tomato Festival](#)  
Ripley City Park hosts this festival honoring the area's rich agricultural heritage, juicy homegrown tomatoes, and small-town charm with plenty of activities for the whole family.

**July 11: Mountain City**  
[Mountain City Sunflower Festival](#)  
This annual festival brings together local vendors and residents for family-friendly activities and live entertainment.

**July 16-19: Brownsville**  
[Summer Jamz Music Fest](#)  
This four-day festival brings together Brownsville's rich musical heritage at numerous local venues.

**July 17-18: Adams**  
[Tennessee-Kentucky Threshermen's Show](#)  
Celebrating the rich agricultural heritage of the region, this festival is organized by the Tennessee-Kentucky Threshermen's Association and is recognized as one of the oldest and largest steam engine and tractor exhibitions in the South.

**July 17-25: Kingsport**  
[Kingsport Fun Fest](#)  
This community-led festival brings Kingsport residents from all over together for art, music, sports, and family fun.

**July 17-18: Rutledge**  
[Grainger Tomato Festival](#)  
First organized in 1992 to promote the area's world-famous tomatoes, this festival promotes the region's agricultural products, artists, authors, talent, and craftsmen.

**July 19: Cumberland Gap**  
[Tri-State Outdoors Fest](#)  
Bringing together representatives from various groups and agencies from the region to celebrate all things outdoors.

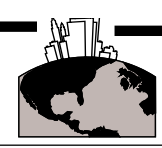
## NATIONAL BRIEFS

**While job openings have increased, new data shows that many job postings in the U.S. are not actually turning into new hires.** Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that job openings hit their highest mark in two years in April with 7.62 million positions listed as available. However, labor turnover showed that the number of new hires is also declining – as are the number of voluntary quits and firings. Economists said imbalances in what pay is being offered and what employees are willing to work for, rising

labor costs, and broader economic uncertainty fueled by the war in Iran may be the reason for the disconnect. Additionally, there could be a disconnect between industries that are hiring and those who are qualified for those positions. More than 90% of April's job openings were in the professional and business services industry, with many of these white-collar jobs requiring at least a bachelor's degree.

**The U.S. economy added 172,000 jobs in May,** according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The latest jobs shattered expectations

that the economy would only add 105,000 jobs and indicates job growth in the country may be stabilizing after a year of weak growth. However, unemployment held steady at 4.3%. Job growth was also revised up with March's initial 29,000 total corrected to 214,000 while April's tally was revised from 64,000 to 179,000 jobs. Annual wage growth for May slowed to 3.4% from 3.6% the previous month. The biggest sector for job growth in May was the leisure and hospitality sector followed by the public sector and healthcare and social assistance sector.



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Ed Stewart, ChFC, CLU, CFS  
Financial Advisor

# TML Board of Directors holds June meeting in Nashville



From left to right, TML Executive Director Anthony Haynes, TML President and Bolivar Mayor Julian McTizic, TMBF President and CEO Wade Morrell, TML 2nd Vice President and Lawrenceburg Mayor Blake Lay, and TML 1st Vice President and Cleveland Mayor Kevin Brooks go over the league's financials during the June board meeting.



TML District 5 Director and Goodlettsville City Manager Tim Ellis, left, and TML legal counsel Charles W. Bone, right.



District 6 Director and Nolensville Vice Mayor Jessica Salamida, left, and District 3 Director and Red Bank Mayor Stefanie Dalton, right.



From left to right, TML Executive Director Anthony Haynes, TML President and Bolivar Mayor Julian McTizic, and At-Large Director and Councilman Jackson Councilman Johnny Dodd discuss issues before the board.



From left to right, TML District 5 Director and Goodlettsville City Manager Tim Ellis, District 6 Director and Nolensville Vice Mayor Jessica Salamida, District 7 Director and Paris City Manager Kim Foster, and TML District 8 Director and Millington Alderwoman Bethany Huffman.



TML 1st Vice President and Cleveland Mayor Kevin Brooks, left, and Athens Vice Mayor Jordan Curtis, right.



At-Large Director and Kingsport Mayor Paul Montgomery, left, and District 1 Director and Erwin Alderman Michael Baker, right.



TML District 8 Director and Millington Alderwoman Bethany Huffman, left, and District 7 Director and Paris City Manager Kim Foster, right.



PEP Representative and Fayetteville Mayor Donna Hartman, left, and TML 2nd Vice President and Lawrenceburg Mayor Blake Lay, right.



TML President and Bolivar Mayor Julian McTizic, left, and At-Large Director Kingsport Mayor Paul Montgomery, right.