



Press Release

Contact: Samantha Wilmoth
Phone: 601.397.2009

Release: July 1, 2026

Municipal Excellence Awards Winners Honored

BILOXI, Mississippi, July 1, 2026 - The Mississippi Municipal League (MML) honored the 2026 Municipal Excellence Awards Winners at the 95th Annual MML Conference Award Luncheon held in Biloxi, Mississippi at the Mississippi Coast Coliseum and Convention Center on Wednesday, July 1, 2026, at 11:15am.

The Excellence Awards program, which began in 1993, recognizes cities that utilize innovative problem solving, excellence in management, citizen participation and community partnerships to provide increased services and a better quality of life for residents. The competition is divided into two population categories: under 10,000 and over 10,000. Within each population category, cities can vie for awards in City Spirit, Community Health, Economic Development & Infrastructure, Public Safety and Youth in Action. Judges also select one application as the Best Overall.

Communities from across Mississippi were recognized for innovative projects that strengthened public safety, expanded recreational opportunities, supported workforce development, improved infrastructure, promoted healthy living and empowered youth to become active community leaders.

The 2026 Excellence Awards winners are as follows:

Best Overall

City of Brandon

“Creating an Outdoor Experience for all Ages”

The city of Brandon needed a second park on the west side of the city to complement the still growing Shiloh Park in the east. 33 years ago, eight baseball fields came into existence. Shiloh Park is home today to 11 soccer fields, 17 baseball/softball fields, two miles of walking track and a splash pad. While seeking to expand outdoor experiences, Brandon began working toward an outdoor experience known as Quarry Trails. Brandon purchased 142 acres and began brainstorming on how this area could be transformed into a park. Initially, the concept was to build an amphitheater and the abandoned quarries along the interstate were combined with the Amphitheater property to create Quarry Park. The park also has over 11 miles of walking, running and bike trails, over a mile of concrete multi-use paths, the Quarry Baseball fields and nature areas home to many plants and animals.

Public access to the Trails, nature areas, bike paths and the Amphitheater, has been accomplished by building a dedicated safe parking lot beside the fire station. The trails, water features and bridges throughout the park have been constructed with volunteer labor until recently. Additional support to improve access to these park amenities came from grants from the MS Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund and the Metropolitan Planning Organization Transportation Alternatives.

This year, as resources are discovered and secured, Brandon will continue to improve and expand Quarry Park with restroom facilities, a registration desk and wayfinding signage amenities throughout the area. Already the home of many high school cross-country meets, 3K/5K walks and fun runs, amphitheater shows, and the Magic of Lights Christmas show, their goal is to provide an array of outdoor activities for all residents and visitors.

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Press Release

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City Spirit Over 10,000 City of Ridgeland “Inaugural Ridgeland Pecan Festival”

The inaugural Ridgeland Pecan Festival welcomed nearly 2,000 residents and visitors to Freedom Ridge Park for a day of community, heritage, and family fun. Guests enjoyed live music, artisan booths, craftsmen demonstrations, a farmers’ market, food trucks, children’s activities, and a pecan dessert showcase.

Inspired by the city’s 125th Anniversary and the designation of the pecan as Ridgeland’s City Tree, the festival was created to honor the community’s agricultural roots while bringing people together in a meaningful way. From artisans to old-time musicians, community organizations, and dedicated volunteers, the festival showcased the people whose talents and traditions help to make Ridgeland unique. Festival Chair Kim Cooper said, “This event was created to honor Ridgeland’s history while providing old-fashioned family fun in the park. Seeing so many families, friends, and visitors come together to celebrate our community made the day truly special.”

Mayor Gene McGee said, “the festival captured the heart of Ridgeland, a community that values its history, its people, and its future.” With beautiful weather, enthusiastic participation, and overwhelming community support, the first-year event exceeded expectations. The Ridgeland Pecan Festival has planted seeds for a new community tradition that will continue to grow for years to come.

City Spirit Under 10,000 Town of Taylorsville “Home For Christmas- Celebrating 125 Years”

To celebrate Taylorsville’s 125th anniversary, the Town of Taylorsville created a community-wide holiday initiative that honored the town’s heritage while bringing residents and visitors together through a series of festive events. The celebration featured the annual Christmas Parade, Lighting of the Tinsel Trail, Hot Chocolate with Santa at The Depot, and a Cookie Stroll hosted by the Taylorsville Chamber of Commerce.

A highlight of the season was the restoration of historic holiday decorations spanning several decades, including the Eureka Street bells from the 1960s, the “Season’s Greetings” display from the 1970s, park candles from the 1990s, and Main Street wreaths and poinsettias dating back to the mid-2000s. The city also restored the Christmas Star for the Nativity scene at Depot Park, honoring the true reason for the season.

Community participation was evident through the Tinsel Trail, where businesses, organizations, and families decorated 25 Christmas trees in Depot Park. Attendance doubled from the previous year, aided by special appearances from Miss Mississippi and the iconic Coca-Cola Christmas Truck. Together, these efforts strengthened community pride, increased downtown foot traffic, supported local businesses, and created a memorable holiday experience that celebrated Taylorsville’s past, present, and future, making the town shiny and bright since 1900.



Press Release

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Community Health Over 10,000 City of Clinton “Living Young Program”

The Living Young Program, offered through the Clinton Therapeutic Recreation Department, provides meaningful recreational, educational, and social opportunities for adults ages 50 and older. Designed to promote active lifestyles, lifelong learning, and community engagement, the program offers a variety of activities including fitness classes, social gatherings, educational workshops, day trips, volunteer opportunities, and special events.

Living Young serves as a welcoming environment where participants can build friendships, stay physically and mentally active, and maintain independence while enhancing their overall quality of life. The program emphasizes inclusion, wellness, and community connection, creating opportunities for older adults to remain engaged and involved in local activities.

By addressing the social, physical, and emotional needs of aging adults, the Living Young Program helps foster healthy aging and strengthens community bonds. Through innovative programming and partnerships, the Clinton Therapeutic Recreation Department continues to provide enriching experiences that support participants in living active, connected, and fulfilling lives.

Community Health Under 10,000 Town of Mantee “Mantee Walking Track”

The walking track in Mantee is a quarter-mile walking track completed in the summer of 2025. It includes two landscaped seating areas with benches and additional concrete walkways connecting the track to the town’s main sidewalks on First Street. The previously underutilized green space that the walking track now occupies has historical significance for the town: an old railroad bed runs along the east side of the track. The train made its last stop in Mantee in 1982. The track has been central to several community events, including the Black-Eyed Pea Festival activities and daffodil planting with local youth that took place in the fall of 2025. The proximity of the track to the Mantee Community Center provides a healthy, safe, outdoor option for private and public events that are held there. Mantee plans to continue to use the space to promote healthy living, for example, by using the track as the start/finish location for the local St. Jude Fun Run in October of 2026 and to pursue ideas to further develop the space to increase the options for local outdoor activities.



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Economic Development & Infrastructure Over 10,000

City of Natchez

“Building Trades Program”

In April 2025, the City of Natchez took a bold leadership role in advancing regional workforce development with the launch of its Building Trades Program at Copiah–Lincoln Community College’s Natchez campus. Spearheaded by the City and authored by the former Director of Natchez Workforce Development Tuwana Williams, the initiative was created to strengthen the region’s skilled labor pipeline by offering free, high-quality training in high demand construction and trade occupations. The city, with the strategic partnership of Adams County, Natchez Adams School District, and Co Lin, now has access to no cost, hands-on, credential-based training that leads directly to career opportunities.

The program provides instruction and industry-recognized credentials in CDL, heavy equipment operation, electrical, carpentry, masonry, and plumbing. Its launch and continued success are made possible through critical funding support from the Delta Regional Authority, CMPDD, and Build Mississippi, reflecting a shared commitment to expanding economic opportunity.

Since its inception, participants have earned over 380 NCCER credentials, with more than 100 additional applicants awaiting placement—clear evidence of strong demand and measurable impact. Through intentional planning, strong partnerships, and measurable results, the Building Trades Program is positioning Natchez to attract new employers, strengthen existing industries, and provide residents with long term career pathways.

Economic Development & Infrastructure Under 10,000

Town of Edwards

“Water Treatment System”

The Activated Carbon system uses specially processed porous carbon, like charcoal, to trap contaminants from liquids. This is effective in removing odors, bad taste and organic compounds, as well as other tough chemicals. It also implements energy-efficient purification processes and meets regulatory standards. This project was done through collaboration with the Central Mississippi Planning and Development District, the town’s engineer, the community, industry experts and Delta Regional Authority who provided a grant of \$2.5 million to fund this project. The project delivered a state-of-the-art system, which produces high quality water. Operational benchmarks were met ahead of schedule. The town residents and local businesses benefit directly from the project outcomes. Improved water reliability and safety enhance public health which supports economic stability and growth. Service quality improvement is evident in clean, safe water, enhancing the residents' health, comfort, and quality of life for generations to come.



Press Release

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Public Safety Over 10,000

City of Oxford

“Faster Response, Safer City: Oxford’s Unified Winter Storm Operations Model”

Following Winter Storm Heather in January 2024, which exposed critical communication and coordination gaps, the City of Oxford implemented a unified winter storm response system. This model includes a formal playbook, shared radio channel, executive coordination structure, and a real-time virtual Emergency Operations Center. During Winter Storm Fern, this system enabled synchronized, multi-department operations that improved situational awareness, accelerated response and recovery, and enhanced public safety while reducing operational inefficiencies. In advance of Winter Storm Fern, the city executed extensive pre-storm preparations, including staging personnel, equipment, and contracted resources; brining roads; securing critical utility materials; and coordinating with local, state, and utility partners. A unified communications plan and scheduled daily coordination briefings ensured real-time information sharing and alignment across all departments. The Department Heads who were part of the response team had three scheduled daily Teams Meetings.

Public Safety Under 10,000

City of Amory

“Amory Fire Department Jr. Academy”

The idea behind the City of Amory Fire Department Junior Fire Academy came from the dreams of a young child growing up in a fireman’s house where the dad was emulated by his son copying his night response routine. From the sound of the pager to watching his father fight for protection of life, property, and community, the seed was planted to become a fireman and be as respected and admired as his father. In 2023, Firefighter Jimenez sought and was granted permission from then Fire Chief McGonagill to begin the Amory Jr. Fire Academy to teach fire and life safety, set good examples of physical health and role models, and create a new generation of those willing to serve their community.

The initial class had 25 kids for one week of training. In the second year, there were 30 kids and two weeks of training which resulted in 67 graduates. By the fourth year, they saw 108 graduating, with some coming back every year. The training is based on the Mississippi Fire Academy including PT, team building, communication and firefighting skills, and more. Each training is capped with a review in the park and graduation ceremony. This successful academy is coordinated by the Amory Fire Department as a combined city effort with local restaurants providing lunch, businesses providing t-shirts, prizes, and backpacks, and volunteers that help during the week.



Press Release

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Youth In Action Over 10,000

City of Gulfport

“Gulfport Student Public Safety Initiative”

The City of Gulfport Fire Department partnered with Gulfport High School to create a hands-on Law and Public Safety program that connects students with municipal services, civic responsibility, and career pathways in emergency services. Firefighters from the Gulfport Fire Department provide daily instruction to junior and senior students in basic firefighting and emergency response skills, including search and rescue, hose operations, teamwork, and scene management.

Since the City became involved, enrollment has grown from nine students to approximately 40 students annually, with every available class section now filled. Students actively participate in large-scale public safety exercises designed to promote community awareness and responsible decision-making. Every other year, the program hosts a “Prom Promise” simulation involving fire, police, EMS, and community partners to demonstrate the consequences of impaired driving. In alternating years, students conduct a full-scale hazardous materials exercise alongside other school programs, creating a collaborative, real-world emergency response experience. The program has strengthened relationships between youth and first responders while preparing students to become engaged, informed, and service-minded members of the Gulfport community.

Youth In Action Under 10,000

City of Richland

“Richland Mayor’s Youth Council- Operation Wishlist”

The Richland Mayor’s Youth Council selected Operation Wishlist as their Christmas service project to support patients at Children’s of Mississippi Hospital. Council members actively participated by shopping for gifts at Walmart, carefully choosing toys, games, and comfort items to brighten the holidays for children receiving care. The council, which is a group of 35 individuals in grades 9-12, also worked closely with hospital staff to help facilitate the project, ensuring that all donated and purchased items met the needs and guidelines of the patients. In addition, they rallied community support by collecting donated items, further expanding the reach of the project.

The collected items—including toys, books, games, and other essentials—were delivered to the hospital to bring joy, comfort, and a sense of normalcy to young patients and their families during Christmas. Operation Wishlist reflects the Youth Council’s dedication to service, compassion, and making a meaningful difference in the lives of others.

The mission of the Mississippi Municipal League is helping cities and towns excel. MML is a non-partisan association established in 1931, representing 290 city, town and village governments in Mississippi. MML is also affiliated with the National League of Cities, a lobbying, legislative and legal arm representing municipalities before the U.S. Congress. For more information about the Mississippi Municipal League, visit www.mmlonline.com.

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