Mississippi Secretary of State's Office

FY 2024 Annual Report

Michael Watson
SECRETARY OF STATE

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The Secretary of State's Office targeted key priorities for Fiscal Year 2024 for each of the eight divisions of the Secretary of State's Office. Details for each of these priorities of the Agency are highlighted within this FY 2024 Annual Report.

As Mississippi's Secretary of State, I'm honored to lead a team who excels in its many job functions and responsibilities. I continue to stand amazed at the 100+ agency employees across our eight divisions who tirelessly work to ensure Mississippi is a better place for generations to come. Through their efforts, we have achieved many notable accomplishments!

Having a strong and informed Mississippi electorate, while safeguarding the integrity of our elections, has remained a priority since I took my oath of office. Our Elections and Publications Divisions have worked to encourage voter education and participation through our Elections 101 campaign, voter registration drives across the state, and the creation of the My Election Day portal. We have also registered over 320,000 voters since 2020. In Mississippi, it is easier to vote than ever.

However, we haven't stopped with just the voting age population. Through programs like our newly created SOS Student Ambassadors and revised Promote the Vote (PTV), we are engaging and investing in Mississippi's youth across the state. Instilling civic duty and responsibility in our future leaders is one of the most significant roles our office has transformed.

To further assist Mississippi's business community, we continue to expand the depth and reach of our Tackle the Tape (TTT) initiative. July marked the four-year anniversary of TTT, which has produced tremendous success in regulation reform. Under the umbrella of the Policy and Research Division, TTT has produced over 130 votes on the Occupational Licensing Review Commission (OLRC) to reduce burdensome regulations while assisting more than 150 individual constituents and businesses directly with red tape hurdles.

Not only have we effected change here in the state but worked with our southeastern counterparts this year to host the first ever Southeastern Business Services meeting. Our Business Services team shined brightly while sharing statutory and rules processes, staffing structure, and how we communicate relevant topics externally. Without a doubt, the Mississippi Secretary of State's Office is a regional and national leader.

However, this is not singular to our Business Services Division. From rockstars within the Securities Division, to our phenomenal Charities Division, or the Public Lands Division who works tirelessly to combat the growing issues of blighted property in the Capital City, each public servant in the agency is committed to excellence to ensure Mississippi is the greatest place to live and work.

Should you need any information or assistance, we invite you to contact us.

Thank you,

Michael Watson
Secretary of State

Michael Watson
SECRETARY OF STATE

ABOUT THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S OFFICE

The Secretary of State's Office was first established in our State's original Constitution in 1817. Over the years, the Office has been entrusted with a number of duties, responsibilities, and functions by the Mississippi State Legislature. The Agency's functions range from the oversight of Gulf Coast Tidelands and 16th Section Lands to scrap metal sales; from the registration of pre-need cemetery plans to the registration of corporations; from conducting training for local election officials to conducting investigations of securities firms and charities.

There are eight divisions within the Secretary of State's Office: Business Services & Regulation, Charities, Communications & Publications, Elections, Policy & Research, Public Lands, External Affairs and Securities. In addition, the Agency employs executive and administrative staff which help oversee the various functions of the Office. The Secretary of State's Office is dedicated to being both a service and information agency. Our mission is to make government more accessible, cost-effective and transparent while providing the highest level of customer service.

The Secretary of State's Office has locations across the state to better serve Mississippians. An office within the Capitol building in Jackson receives and records executive documents from the Governor. This is part of the Secretary of State's role as "Keeper of the Capitol." Performance measures for each division are collected and reported quarterly.

OFFICE LOCATIONS

400 High Street, Room 105
Jackson, MS 39201
601-359-3123

401 Mississippi Street
Jackson, MS 39201
601-359-1350

125 S. Congress Street
Jackson, MS 39201
601-359-1350

1141 Bayview Avenue, Suite 100
Biloxi, MS 39530
228-432-0541

5779 Getwell Rd., Bldg. D1
Southaven, MS 38672
662-470-1552

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BUSINESS SERVICES & REGULATION

The Business Services & Regulation Division processes the formation of Mississippi corporations, limited liability companies, limited partnerships, and other business and non-profit entities. The Division regulates and approves all notaries public in the State of Mississippi and administers trademarks, service marks, and non-profit laws. It is also tasked with regulating pre-need/perpetual care providers, enforcing scrap metal laws in the State, monitoring Athlete Agents and overseeing administrative procedures for State government.

CHARITIES

The Charities Division registers charitable organizations and professional fundraisers which solicit contributions in the State, in addition to responding to charities complaints and investigating potential charities fraud.

COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLICATIONS

The Communications & Publications Division is responsible for managing the Agency's overall brand and ensuring accurate information is delivered to the public and press in a timely manner. The Division also produces official State and Agency publications in traditional printed format as well as digital versions downloadable from the SOS website. The Division also oversees the Student Ambassador Program, Promote the Vote (PTV), Mississippi Businesses Against Trafficking (MBAT), and Vote in Honor of a Veteran.

ELECTIONS

The Elections Division has many roles in ensuring that Mississippians' voices are heard clearly through the election process. These roles include training election officials, collecting campaign finance and lobbying reports, managing the statewide voter registry, collecting election returns, and assisting local election officials in carrying out their election-related responsibilities. The Division also supports the Secretary of State in his role as Chief Elections Officer for the State.

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

The External Affairs Division develops partnerships with business development entities in the state to facilitate economic growth, connects the resources of the agency to new and existing Mississippi businesses and forms partnerships with K-12 and IHL for educational purposes.

POLICY & RESEARCH

The Policy & Research Division acts as a research and development arm for the Agency, looking for new ways to streamline services and develop potential legislation.

PUBLIC LANDS

The Public Lands Division has the constitutional and statutory authority for enforcement of the 16th Section Public School Trust Lands and Lieu Lands laws, development and implementation of the Public Trust Tidelands Management Programs, sale of lands forfeited to the State for non-payment of ad valorem taxes, inventory of State agency lands and services to the public and governmental subdivisions relating to sales, acquisitions, leasing, and title of the State's real property assets.

SECURITIES

The Securities Division is responsible for regulating both the sale of securities and the securities professionals who sell them. In addition, the Division works with federal and state prosecuting authorities to investigate and bring charges against violators of the State's securities laws. The Division carries out these functions under the authority granted to it by the Mississippi Securities Act.

BUSINESS SERVICES & REGULATION

The Business Services & Regulation Division provides business-related services to anyone interested in doing business in Mississippi.

BUSINESS SERVICES

STARTING A BUSINESS

The Business Services & Regulation Division is the starting point for many entrepreneurs wishing to conduct business in the State. Consumers can search for a unique business name, check their corporate status, order certified documents, and search other companies. The Division assists with the formation of corporations, limited liability companies, foreign business trusts, limited partnerships, and other business structures. State law determines the structure of each business.

UNIFORM COMMERCIAL CODE

Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) filings are also handled through the Business Services & Regulation Division. These secured transactions are recorded and accessible to financial institutions, governmental agencies, and others engaged in commercial lending and trade.

STATUTORY SERVICES

The Division is also responsible for a wide array of statutory responsibilities, including accepting service of process, recording pesticides, registering carnivals, circuses, polygraph examiners, and recording public official bonds.

TRADEMARKS AND SERVICE MARKS

Trademarks and service marks are recorded and approved through the Business Services & Regulation Division. Recent trademarks legislation proposed by the Secretary of State's Office and adopted by the legislature received international recognition as one of the most forward, aggressive trademark laws in the nation.

CHARTERS AND ANNEXATIONS

The Business Services & Regulation Division also files interlocal agreements and municipal charters, and records annexations for all municipalities.

FEE INCOME FY 2024

Corporate Annual Report	$1,125,875
LLC Annual Reports	$5,416,500
Uniform Commercial Code	$2,145,158

78,248	Phone calls for business-related services answered in under 30 seconds by a live person
116,402	Corporate documents and UCC's filed online, making the Division completely paperless
49,276	Formed almost 50,000 new businesses* **Online applications allow citizens to start a business or file an annual report online in a matter of minutes.*
372	Issued or renewed more than 375 trademarks

BUSINESS SERVICES & REGULATION

Y'ALL BUSINESS

Y'all Business, a website designed to help small businesses locate or expand in the State of Mississippi, is part of our Agency's continuing effort to promote business in Mississippi. This one-of-a-kind online resource for free Mississippi economic development information includes a mobile interface making it easier to access the site on a cell phone. The website provides a wealth of detailed information you need for your job and your business. Thousands of free business summaries, retail markets, and other reports have been downloaded from the Y'all Business website.

MISSISSIPPI BOSS

Mississippi BOSS (Mississippi Business One-Stop Shop) is a unique tool that is the perfect starting place for Mississippians looking to start a business for the first time. The interactive website walks potential first-time business owners through a series of steps that assist the entrepreneur with everything from choosing the right type of business entity – whether LLC, corporation, or partnership – to alerting the business owner of other state agencies involved in the registration process. As the customer answers the questions in the interactive steps, Mississippi BOSS builds a user profile and helps the customer make essential decisions about their business. The website serves as a helpful resource to aspiring entrepreneurs and first-time business owners.

BUSINESS SERVICES & REGULATION

The Business Services & Regulation Division serves various consumer protection interests with its regulation of pre-need funeral providers, privately-owned cemeteries, Athlete Agents and scrap metal dealers and recyclers. These business entities are examined and audited by Division staff to determine if the business is complying with State legislation and regulations designed to protect the consumers' interests. Examinations and audits may be either complaint-based or routine. Violators are subject to administrative fines, suspension of a license, or, in extreme cases, revocation of a license issued by the Division.

REGULATION & ENFORCEMENT

PROTECTING CONSUMERS - PRE-NEED AND CEMETERY PURCHASES

Each year, Mississippi consumers make purchases in the aggregate of approximately $50 million from funeral homes and cemeteries for pre-need funeral and cemetery goods and services. The purchase of final expense merchandise and services is a unique consumer transaction with the consumer paying for very specific goods and services that will be provided at an undetermined time in the future.

Additionally, consumers usually have limited experience with making such end of life decisions and purchases. For these reasons, the Division is charged with enforcing laws enacted by the Mississippi Legislature to ensure the consumer's funding for pre-need purchases is secure and in place at the time of death and the goods and services meet the level of quality contemplated at the time of purchase.

Closely related to the purchase of pre-need funeral and cemetery goods and services, the Division also monitors and enforces compliance with perpetual care trust laws by for-profit, privately-owned cemeteries. There are 99 for-profit cemeteries in Mississippi which offer and market perpetual care to the public. An important task of the Business Services & Regulation Division is examination of the handling of consumer funds for burial plot purchases to ensure perpetual care trusting required by State law is accomplished. The Division works cases throughout the State to assist consumers.

The Business Services & Regulation Division registers and regulates sellers of pre-need funeral products, perpetual care cemeteries, scrap metal dealers and processors, and athlete agents.

NOTARIES PUBLIC

The Business Services & Regulation Division oversees all notaries public in the State and received over 12,000 notary applications and renewals in FY 2024. The Division investigates all notary complaints. Apostilles and authentications are prepared and attached to documents to verify authenticity or validity. Many of these documents are presented in foreign countries.

FEE INCOME FY 2024

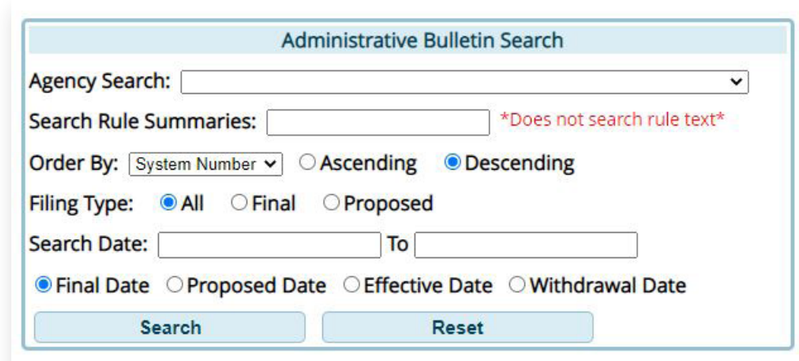
Notaries and Trademarks	$160,001
Regulation and Enforcement	$104,350

11,953	Notary applications/renewals and apostille registrations
439	Regulation and Enforcement registrations
343	Regulation and Enforcement examinations/investigations/complaints

BUSINESS SERVICES & REGULATION

RULES AND REGULATIONS

The Business Services & Regulation Division publishes the Mississippi Administrative Bulletin and the Mississippi Administrative Code where all State government rules and regulations are accessible to the public on the Secretary of State's website. The Division supports both public and State agencies with procedural steps for adopting rules and obtaining public comment in the process. For the past year, the Division received and published approximately 800 regulation changes.



ATHLETE AGENTS

Additionally, the Division licenses and monitors the activities of Athlete Agents under the Mississippi Athlete Agent's Act. This Act helps to protect young athletes in the State from falling victim to unscrupulous sports agents who might otherwise attempt to take advantage of an athlete's inexperience when signing with a professional sports agent.

The Division regulates sports agents registration requirements with the Secretary of State's Office.

SCRAP METAL DEALERS

In 2008, the Mississippi Legislature tasked the Secretary of State's Office with licensing metal dealers in response to the rampant problem of metal theft throughout the country. All scrap metal dealers who wish to purchase regulated metals must register with the Division and upload information and pictures of all regulated metals purchases to an online database. Division examiners and all law enforcement have access to this database to search for stolen metal property.

SECURITIES

The Securities Division is responsible for enforcing the Mississippi securities laws, as well as the regulation and registration of securities firms, agents, and products.

In addition to enforcing the Mississippi Securities Act, the Securities Division is responsible for the regulation and registration of securities firms, agents, and products, including investment adviser firms. State-level investment adviser firms are those that manage less than $100 million in customer assets, and this past year, 30 such firms were based in Mississippi and registered with the Division. There were 50 state-firms based in other states that were also registered to do business with Mississippi residents. A total of 1103 SEC-level firms, which are investment advisers that manage more than $100 million in customer assets, are also notice filed with the Division and can do business in the State. The Division registered 2,709 investment adviser representatives.

In addition, there were 1,291 broker-dealer firms registered in the State (two are Mississippi domiciled and 82 have branches within the State) and 149,075 broker-dealer agents. The Division closed 96 investigations. Other sources for these investigations included complaints and tips of violations from other regulators, investors and the public, exam findings, and registration filings. In addition the Division closed 37 routine exams of broker dealer branches and state-level investment adviser firms.

During FY 2020, the Division added new online filing options through the Electronic Filing Depository: Unit Investment Trusts and Universal Filing Type which includes Registration by Coordination and Qualification, Reg A Tier 2, and Crowdfunding Offerings. This enables firms to more efficiently submit the required documents and enables the Division to reduce the turnaround time for processing these filings. There were 27,142 filings utilizing this online option in FY 2024.

During FY 2024, the Division collected $8,939,682 in offering-related filings, and $9,216,450 in registration filings for securities professionals and firms.

The Securities Division protects investors in the State from unscrupulous organizations using the most up-to-date securities laws in the nation.

Under Miss. Code Ann. § 75-71-413, broker-dealers and investment advisers must report suspected financial exploitation of a vulnerable adult to the Securities Division. Once the suspected exploitation is reported, the statute provides safe-harbor protection for the firms to delay transactions within accounts of the vulnerable adult. This is a needed protection while the Division and the Department of Human Services work together to investigate the allegation.

The Secretary of State's Office is focused on investor protection and in FY 2024, the Division worked 40 vulnerable adult cases.

FEE INCOME FY 2024

Securities **$18,156,132**

$18,979,665	Amount of revenue collected in offering-related filings, registration filings for securities professionals and firms, and administrative enforcement cases
27,142	Offering-related filings
99	Administrative enforcement case
30	State-based investment adviser firms now registered with the Secretary of State's Office
96	Closed investigations, which included possible securities laws violations
1,291	Broker-dealer firms registered in the State

CHARITIES

Through enforcement of the Mississippi Charitable Solicitation Act, the Mississippi Secretary of State's Charities Division is responsible for protecting donors in the State by ensuring their hard-earned dollars are used for the purpose intended.

The Charities Division protects Mississippi donors from unscrupulous charities who might prey on our citizens.

THE CHARITIES ACT

The Charities Act requires the registration of every nonprofit soliciting contributions and having fundraisers with the Charities Division. The Charities Act does allow certain organizations to be exempted from this registration requirement. However, this exemption is not automatic. The organization must request the exemption by submitting the online notice of exemption form.

The Charities Act not only strengthens the Agency's ability to enforce laws against dishonest charities, but also gives the Charities Division the authority to subpoena witnesses and documents during investigations and to bring actions in Chancery Court to stop illegal activities, collect fines, and remove charitable corporate status. Through the strong enforcement of the Charities Act, Mississippi donors can have more confidence in their charitable giving. Citizens are able to check the status of charities by clicking the "Search Charities" on the Charities Home Page located on the website.

To protect Mississippi donors, a key priority of the Agency is to make it more difficult for organizations to misappropriate charitable dollars. The Agency will continue working with charitable organizations in the state to maximize the amount of funds allocated for actual charitable purposes. Increasing the transparency in charitable organizations and providing this information to Mississippians allows our citizens to have peace of mind in charitable giving.

FOR YOUR PROTECTION

Under "Search Charities," the percentage of funds spent on all expenses are listed (program services, fundraising, and administrative). Armed with the most up-to-date Charities laws in the nation to protect Mississippians, charity complaints can be filed with the Division on the Secretary of State's website.

CHECK YOUR CHARITY

An annual #CheckYourCharity campaign lets you know how your donations are spent. The Charities Division encourages Mississippians to check their supported charities with the Secretary of State's Office before they donate. The Charities Division can serve as a valuable resource in vetting disaster relief charities after devastations caused by hurricanes, tornadoes, and other disasters. Donors can check the registration status and financial practice of disaster relief charities before donating.

FEE INCOME FY 2024

Charities **$436,765**

12, 286	Total number of Charities registered or exempted with the Charities Division
7,014	Charity registrations/filings (initial and renewal) and exemptions processed
179	Charities examinations, investigations, and complaints completed
574	Charities legal actions

ELECTIONS

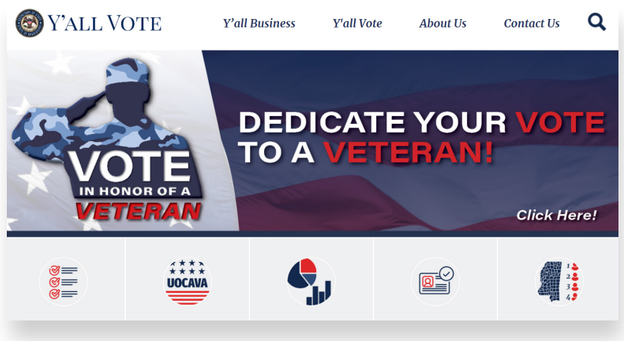
The role of the Elections Division continues to include training county and municipal election officials, providing elections-related support to the counties and municipalities, receiving election returns, assisting local elections officials in carrying out their election-related responsibilities, and collecting campaign finance and lobbying reports.

Y'ALL VOTE

The Y'all Vote website is an online voter information center aimed at preparing voters to cast a ballot on Election Day. Information on election dates, voter registration, military voters, voter ID, and more can all be found on the Y'all Vote website (yallvote.ms).

Mississippi voters are able to:

- Electronically update name and address information online
- Determine whether they are registered to vote
- Locate their polling place



CAMPAIGN FINANCE

The Elections Division receives campaign finance reports from candidates and Political Action Committees (PACs). Candidates and PACs may file by user-friendly Excel spreadsheets that allows users to input contributions and disbursements over time. Additionally, contributions and disbursements may also be manually typed on the forms specifically for each reporting period. These forms are available on our website. All reports filed are searchable by candidate or PAC name. Campaign finance reports, reporting schedules, and late-filers may be viewed online by the general public on the Secretary of State's website.

8,962	Voter IDs issued as of June 30, 2024
3,052	Campaign finance reports
1,358	Voter registration updates via secure online website
1,225,176	Of the 1,961,017 registered voters cast a ballot for Governor in the 2024 General Election
17 observers	In 43 counties in the 2024 General Election
15 observers	In 44 counties in the 2024 Primary Election

ELECTIONS

LOBBYIST REGISTRATION

Mississippi law requires all lobbyists to register with the Secretary of State's Office in order to conduct business in the State. Lobbyists' and Lobbyists' Clients reports may be viewed online by the general public on the Secretary of State's website.

CERTIFICATION OF ELECTION RESULTS

The Secretary of State's Office is responsible for certifying statewide elections and multi-county elections.

SEMS

The Elections Division works with election officials of counties and municipalities to assist in maintaining a statewide voter registration database, known as the Statewide Elections Management System, or "SEMS." The Division provides education and the tools available to the appropriate election officials in order to maintain accurate voter rolls.

TRAINING

The Elections Division provides certification programs and continuing education training programs to county and municipal Election Commissioners and executive committees. Training programs address substantive law as well as technical aspects of the Statewide Elections Management System and the Statewide Voting Machine System. Training is provided to election officials on how to operate specific voting devices, as well as how to train individual poll managers for Election Day responsibilities. The Division is focused on utilizing current technology, such as webinars and online poll manager training, to make our training accessible to election officials throughout the State.

The Elections Division works for fair, unbiased elections through accountability and training as Mississippi citizens exercise their right to vote.

FEE INCOME FY 2024

Lobbying Registrations, Civil Penalties from Lobbying, Candidate Qualifying Fees **TOTAL: $ 62,913**

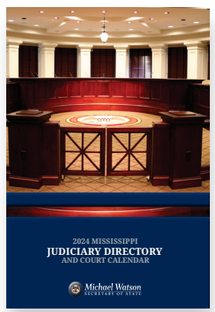
4,085	Lobbying reports
1,529	County and Municipal Election Officials trained
576	Poll Workers completed online training

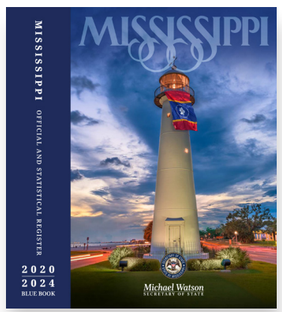
PUBLICATIONS

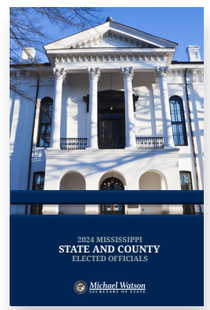
The Publications Division is responsible for managing the Agency's overall brand and ensuring accurate information is delivered to the public and press in a timely manner. The Division also produces official State and Agency publications in traditional printed format as well as digital versions downloadable from the SOS website.

PUBLICATIONS

- AGENCY BROCHURES
- BLUE BOOK
- CHARITIES REPORT
- GENERAL LAWS
- GUIDE TO THE MAGNOLIA STATE
- HOUSE JOURNAL
- JUDICIARY DIRECTORY AND COURT CALENDAR
- LOCAL AND PRIVATE LAWS
- MY MISSISSIPPI COLORING BOOK
- SENATE JOURNAL
- STATE & COUNTY ELECTED OFFICIALS DIRECTORY







Mississippi Business Against Trafficking (MBAT) is an initiative launched by Secretary of State Michael Watson in 2022 to increase awareness of human trafficking, especially through the business sector. MBAT strives to equip business owners in empowering their employees, customers, partners, and communities to join the fight in #coMBATing trafficking. Utilizing the MBAT website, constituents may review educational materials and virtual trainings. MBAT Summits were also created to allow business owners and community members collaboration with state and national experts.

Vote in Honor of a Veteran, renewed for the 2024 General Election in collaboration with Mississippi Veterans Affairs (MSVA), is a program designed to honor the longstanding commitment of our veterans and service members. Through this program, Mississippians may dedicate their vote to a veteran or service member. Participants receive a small packet of election materials and a Vote in Honor of a Veteran button to show appreciation and respect for service members on Election Day. Submissions, including the honoree's name, branch of service, and years of service, are displayed on the Vote in Honor of a Veteran Honor Wall.

Promote the Vote (PTV) is an annual, nonpartisan voter education program sponsored by the Secretary of State's Office to educate Mississippi students grades K-12 on civic engagement. The 2024 theme, "This Land Is My Land," encourages students to reflect on the unique qualities and charm of Mississippi, and why they are proud to call it home. This year's program consists of a mock election as well as art, essay, and poetry contests. It is open to all public, private, parochial, and home schools.

The SOS Student Ambassador Program is a cooperative program between high school seniors, the Secretary of State's Office, and Secretary Michael Watson. Students with a passion for leadership and state government are hand-chosen to participate, and ultimately, equipped to return to their schools as proponents of voter education and awareness. This year, 70 students were selected from 31 counties and 42 schools. Programming includes two summits in Jackson, campus visits across the state, and monthly webinars with local, state, and national officials and leaders.

PUBLICATIONS

12,214,678	Number of visits to the Secretary of State's website (includes visits to Y'all Vote)
116	Number of press releases issued
36	Agency publications produced

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

The External Affairs Division develops partnerships with business development entities in the state to facilitate economic growth, connects the resources of the agency to new and existing Mississippi businesses, forms partnerships with K-12 and IHL for educational purposes, and outreach for legislative affairs.

In January of 2022, the Welcome to Business Webinars were launched in cooperation with the Mississippi Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) and the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) to give new businesses the opportunity to learn about the free resources available through the Secretary of State's Office and other state entities to help their business succeed. These bi-monthly 60-minute live webinars introduce new startups to free resources available in Mississippi. In March of 2023, the Secretary of State's Office was awarded the prestigious International Merit Award by IACA for this initiative.

MS SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CENTER/UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI MCLEAN INSTITUTE STARTUP EVENTS

External Affairs partners with the Mississippi Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) and the University of Mississippi McLean institute to conduct training events for potential new business owners in economically disadvantaged areas of the state. Participants are taken step by step through the process of registering their business and filing their annual report with the Secretary of State's Office and the additional resources available on our site.

CEU PROGRAM FOR EDUCATORS

External Affairs has partnered with the Mississippi Council on Economic Education and the University of Southern Mississippi to provide training and curriculum for teachers based on our MS Boss and Y'all Business platforms.

CONSERVATION TASK FORCE

In November 2021, the Division launched the Conservation Task Force (CTF) comprised of conservation leaders and experts from 25 organizations in the public and private sectors. The goal of the CTF is to promote and enhance conservation efforts through strategic planning, responsible funding, and education. CTF stakeholders are also heavily involved in the Mississippi Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund.

BROADWATER MARINA RESTORATION PROJECT

The historic Broadwater Marina is 30 acres of prime public trust tidelands property in Biloxi, MS. The marina was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and has received subsequent damage from coastal hurricanes in recent years. The External Affairs Division put together grant requests and was awarded $8.7 million in funding to restore the marina to a state of safe public access and to incentivize further economic development on the site. Construction began in early 2024 and should be completed in 2025.

PUBLIC LANDS

The Public Lands Division continues to fulfill the constitutional and statutory duties regarding the stewardship of 16th Section Public School Trust Lands and Lieu Lands, the Public Trust Tidelands, and Tax-Forfeited properties.

16TH SECTION LANDS

The Secretary of State serves as supervisory trustee overseeing the management and leasing of more than 640,000 acres of 16th Section Public School Trust Lands by 99 local school districts. The Public Lands Division strives to improve leasing practices on 16th Section Lands.

The Division maintains a map on the Agency website showing the approximate location of all hunting and fishing leases across the State, with rental information and contact information for managing school boards.

The Agency website also publishes public bid notices for hunting and fishing leases, agricultural leases, sales of timber and other forest products, and oil and gas leases.

The Secretary of State's Office and Mississippi Forestry Commission maintain a cooperative partnership with local school districts to manage timber assets. The Division maintains pre-sale inventories of timber sold by lump-sum sale, monitors current timber harvest operations, inspects properties for proper usage and waste, and assists businesses by emerging markets for renewable energy in determining the availability and type of resources available on public school trust lands.

FEE INCOME FY 2024

Tidelands	$11,923,951
Tideland Assessment	$3,113,778

14,673	16th Section Land leases
$55.5 million	Revenues from 16th Section leases* **All 16th Section land revenue stays with the local school district.*
$20.4 million	Revenue from surface leasing
$6.8 million	Sales of timber/forest products
$5.6 million	Oil and gas royalty payments
79	79 school districts reporting for FY 2024* **The Public Lands Division strives to improve leasing practices for 16th Section land in order to receive the maximum rate of return for schools.*

PUBLIC LANDS

PUBLIC TRUST TIDELANDS

Public Trust Tidelands and submerged lands are under water lands naturally subject to tidal influence. The inland boundary is the mean high tide line established over 19-years epochs, and the seaward boundary is the State boundary, approximately 10 miles south of the barrier islands. These Tidelands are owned by the State in trust for the citizens of Mississippi. The Secretary of State is the trustee of this great public trust.

It is declared to be the public policy of this State to favor the preservation of the natural trust of the public tidelands and their ecosystems and to prevent the despoliation and destruction of them, except where a specific alteration of specific public trust tidelands would serve a higher public interest in compliance with the public purpose of the public trust in which such tidelands are held. (Miss. Code Ann. § 29-15-3)

With regard to the Public Trust Tidelands and submerged lands held by the State in trust, the focus of the Division is to:

- Protect public use and public access
- Acquire property for preservation and protection in the coastal preserve system
- Support the restoration of degraded public wetlands
- Develop the use of Public Trust Tidelands for recreational and educational purposes which meet the higher purpose for which the trust was established

Secretary of State Michael Watson, on behalf of the Gulf Coast legislative delegation, presented Mississippi Department of Marine Resources with a check for $11,000,000 representing the Public Trust Tidelands Fund and Public Trust Assessment Fund total for Fiscal Year 2024.

Revenue for the Tidelands Trust Fund is generated by leases on lands owned by the State in trust for the people of Mississippi, and assessment for onshore gaming operations. Generated funds are disbursed to MDMR to be spent by the legislature for programs and projects geared toward conservation, reclamation, and preservation of Mississippi's tidelands, and the increase of public access areas on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

TAX-FORFEITED PROPERTY

All properties for which ad valorem taxes are past due are subject to sale by the county in which the lands are located. Any lands not purchased at the local tax sale are stricken from local tax rolls, and transferred to the State, subject to sale by the Secretary of State's Office pursuant to applicable statutes. The Secretary of State's Office works to sell these lands and return parcels to productive use. Through private ownership, these lands once again produce property tax revenues for the counties and municipalities in which they are located. Currently, the State holds more than 7,000 tax-forfeited lands valued at approximately $30 million.

ONLINE AUCTIONS

Online bidding on tax-forfeited property auctions is available on the Secretary of State's website. To place a bid, the user must register online. Users are able to view property details such as parcel location, pictures, and an auction map. Other information such as auction dates, bid notices, and bid amounts are also available. Successful bidders are notified by email.

The "Buy It Now" feature allows bidders to pay a "Buy It Now" price on any parcel in order to purchase a property immediately instead of waiting until the end of the auction.

FEE INCOME FY 2024

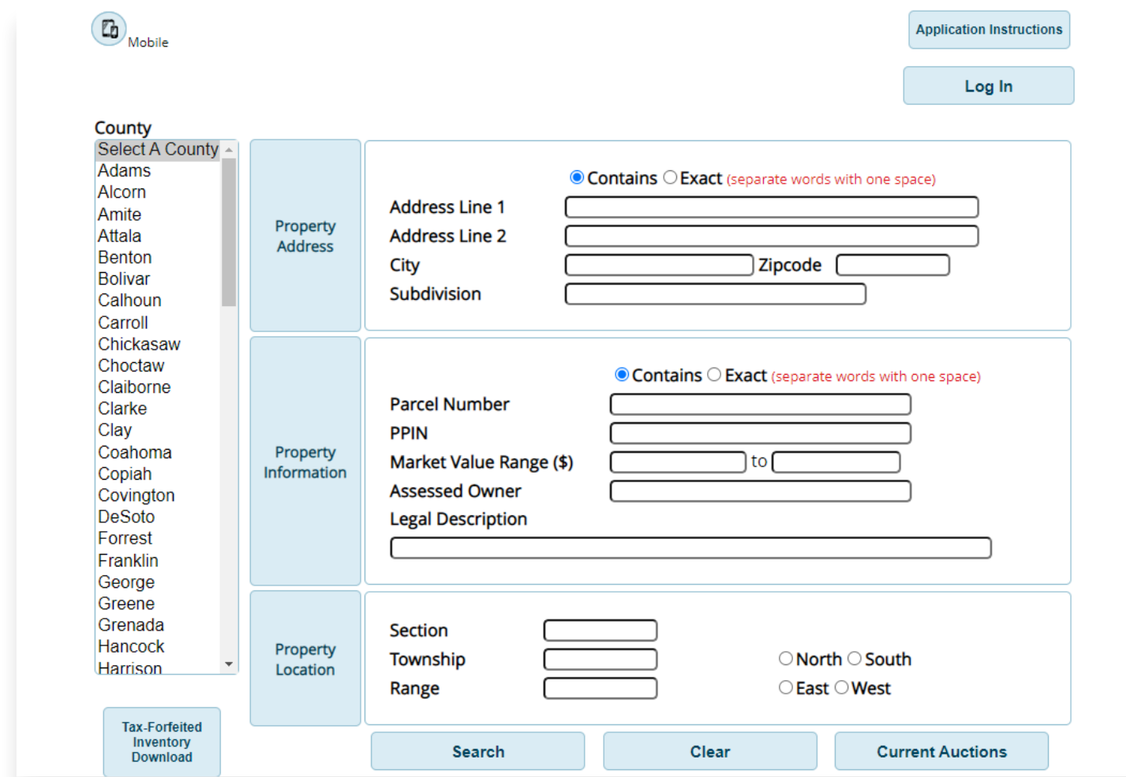
Land Sales (Tax-Forfeited)	$3,000,000
Land Sales Application Fees (Tax-Forfeited)	$60,000

20,000	Tax-Forfeited applications processed
1,801	Tax-Forfeited patents issued
$3 million	More than $3 million in FY 2024 property sales* **Tax-forfeited lands can be transferred to governmental entities without cost for public use.*

AGENCY LANDS

The continued goal of the Public Lands Division is to provide the members of the legislature, agency officials, county officials, and the general public accurate land information to allow proper utilization and management, and, where the legislature deems appropriate, transfer parcels so they may be transitioned back onto the county property rolls.

An inventory of tax-forfeited lands owned by the State is available on the Secretary of State's website at sos.ms.gov.



POLICY & RESEARCH

The Policy and Research Division is the research and development engine of the Mississippi Secretary of State's Office. The Division develops potential legislation, coordinates partnerships and innovative solutions to challenges facing the State, oversees the Public Records Request process, directs the Agency's involvement in the Occupational Licensing Review Commission, and supports the Conservation Task Force.

The Division developed legislation adopted by the Mississippi legislature during the 2024 regular session to reform laws governing election integrity, charities registration and auditing, nonprofit annual reporting, timber bidding, and deep fakes in elections as summarized below.

HOUSE BILLS

HOUSE BILL 299

This legislation included a provision to modernize the timber bidding process outlined in Section 29-3-45, Mississippi Code of 1972, by allowing the reception of electronic bids for timber sales. The current business climate relies heavily on modern technology to remain competitive. By allowing electronic bids to be accepted for the sale of timber, this law will create a more competitive business climate by utilizing all of the available resources to receive the most competitive bids. In addition to modernizing the process, this legislation will allow businesses to submit online bids for timber and increase the amount of potential revenue.

HOUSE BILL 845

Amended Section 79-11-507, Mississippi Code of 1972, to resolve an issue the Charities Division has often encountered with the registration of certain charitable organizations. The issue involved charities that have been in existence but are filing an initial registration with the Secretary of State's Office (SOS). Under the previous version of the subject statute, a charity filing an initial registration with the Charities Division may have been required to file a Form 990 after the expiration date for the current year. In these instances, the Form 990 filed by the charity would have immediately been out of compliance, even though it submitted the proper documentation. The amendment addresses this issue so that charities will no longer automatically be out of compliance when completing the Form 990 and subsequently registering with the SOS.

HOUSE BILL 1344

Created a process for domestic and foreign nonprofit organizations registered with the Secretary of State's Office (SOS) to submit an annual report, at no charge, to the SOS. The annual report will allow the SOS to maintain accurate contact information for these nonprofits and authorizes it to administratively dissolve nonprofit organizations that are not in compliance with the provisions of this law. Additionally, the annual report form requires nonprofit organizations to report any public funds (defined in the law as "state or local governmental authority located within the State of Mississippi") it has received during its most recently completed fiscal year, which will help create more transparency in the disbursement of state funds.

HOUSE BILL 1135

Amended Section 23-15-913, Mississippi Code of 1972, to specify which judges have jurisdiction to hear election disputes on Election Day. The legislation outlines the process in which judges are appointed to hear election disputes to avoid instances in which more than one (1) judge may be appointed to hear a dispute by separate courts of jurisdiction.

SENATE BILLS

SENATE BILL 2576

Amended Section 23-15-563, Mississippi Code of 1972, to clarify the voter identification law and to address contradictory language around the validity of identification when used for the purpose of voting. This bill creates a more solid statutory foundation for voter identification laws and, therefore, helps establish greater election integrity in Mississippi.

SENATE BILL 2545

Amended Section 79-11-501, Mississippi Code of 1972, to clarify an amendment to made by the legislature during the 2023 Legislative session (Senate Bill No. 2077 (Laws of 2023)). The purpose of this bill was to add a definition for "monetary donations" in Section 79-11-501, Mississippi Code of 1972. While the term "monetary donations" has been displayed on Secretary of State (SOS) registration forms, no definition was provided in the laws related to audits of charitable organizations. Because the SOS office has received numerous inquiries about its interpretation of the term "monetary donations" as contemplated in S.B. 2077 (Laws of 2023), adding the subject definition will provide clarity to charitable organizations and their auditing representatives.

POLICY & RESEARCH

SENATE BILL 2425

Amended Section 23-15-907, Mississippi Code of 1972, to clarify the ballot harvesting bill (Senate Bill No. 2358 (Laws of 2023), codified as Section 23-15-907), which was enacted during the 2023 Legislative session. The purpose of this bill was to add three definitions to the original language to provide clarity on which individuals are exempt from the ballot harvesting law. As outlined in the ballot harvesting law, certain individuals are exempt from the prohibitions in the language and this legislation simply adds the definition of each person contemplated in the law.

SENATE BILL 2577

Created a new section in Title 97, Chapter 13 of the Mississippi Code of 1972 to define and create criminal penalties for the wrongful dissemination of digitizations, also known as "deep fakes." The image and likeness of elected officials can now be digitally replicated using recent technological and media advancements, which creates opportunities for the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation from a seemingly reliable source. This legislation will help protect our election process by outlawing the use of digitizations to incite violence, undermine elections, or deter persons from voting. It also outlines a process for injunctive relief in order to quickly remedy any violation of this law.

The Secretary of State's Office continued to create meaningful change for small businesses and consumers through the Tackle the Tape initiative, which sets out to cut regulations that are anti-competitive and do not substantially further the safety of Mississippi citizens. The Agency has always served as a premier resource for the business community, and Secretary Watson understands the impact burdensome red tape has on the state's economy.

Since launching the Tackle the Tape initiative in July of 2020, the Secretary of State's Office has seen tremendous success in regulation reform. To ensure efficient review of all 118,000+ regulations in Mississippi's regulatory code, the Division implemented a comprehensive strategic plan called "29 by 29." This plan serves as a roadmap within the Tackle the Tape initiative with an end goal of reviewing every regulation for all 29 occupational licensing boards and commissions by the year 2029. The Division and its partners have conducted a joint evaluation of the regulations for 10 of the state's 29 licensing boards and commissions so far and will be reviewing 4 more in FY 2025.

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Dedicated to being both a service and information agency.