

# Mississippi Secretary of State's Office

**FY 2021 Annual Report**



**Michael Watson**  
SECRETARY OF STATE





**Michael Watson**  
SECRETARY OF STATE

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As your Secretary of State, I'm honored to lead an office that has excelled in its many job functions and responsibilities. Amid a global pandemic and its aftereffects, our eight divisions have continued to provide the highest level of customer service possible, in part because of our teleworking policies which were deemed as "exemplary" by the PEER Committee. Reports from fiscal year 2021 prove our team's ability to seamlessly adapt to change and exceed expectations during challenging times with one goal in mind: protecting and serving the citizens of Mississippi.

We have seen significant progress in all areas including an increase in the number of business-related phone calls received and handled by Business Services (45%), an increase in the number of scrap metal, pre-need, perpetual care, athletic agent exams, investigations, or complaints completed by Regulation & Enforcement (67%), an increase in the number of registrations and renewals processed by both the Charities (26%) and Securities Divisions (10%), an increase in Tax Forfeited Land applications in Public Lands (60%), an increase in the number of election training sessions conducted by our Elections Division (68%), and our Communications and Publications Division worked diligently to keep Mississippians informed with an increase in updated website content (87%).

Cutting the anti-competitive regulatory burden has been another one of our primary efforts. Working closely with the Occupational Licensing Review Commission and other state agencies, as well as small businesses and industry leaders across the state, our Tackle the Tape initiative through the Policy and Research Division has seen tremendous success since its inception. In fact, Mississippi led the nation in the greatest number of new business applications since COVID-19 began.

We are proud of the daily services we provide to our citizens and invite you to contact us for any information or assistance needed. We continue to look for more ways to trim our budget, provide transparency, and enhance the overall customer experience, whether in-person or online.

Thank you,

Michael Watson  
Secretary of State



The Secretary of State's Office targeted key priorities for Fiscal Year 2021 and 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 2021 Annual Report.



# 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

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

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

2844 Traceland Drive, Suite 100  
Tupelo, MS 38801  
662-844-0194

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

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

## 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 trademark, service mark, and non-profit laws. It is also tasked with regulating pre-need/perpetual care providers, enforcing scrap metal laws in the State, 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 produces and distributes official state publications, such as the Official Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi, more commonly known as the Blue Book, and oversees educational, outreach, and constituent programs, including the Promote the Vote voter education program for Mississippi's K-Grade 12 students.

## ELECTIONS

The Elections Division has many roles in ensuring that Mississippians' voices are heard clearly through the election process. These roles include training elections 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, forms partnerships with K-12 and IHL for educational purposes, and oversees legislative affairs.

## 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.

# FINANCIAL SUMMARY

## CHARITIES, SECURITIES, AND BUSINESS SERVICES & REGULATION

EFFICIENCIES	CATEGORY	OUTPUT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide online services for businesses and corporations</li> </ul>	UCC documents filed	319,735
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain turnaround times of less than 24-48 hours for customer filings</li> </ul>	Telephone calls received	53,417
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide more opportunities and methods for enforcement education</li> </ul>	Other corporate documents filed	349,527
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase registration of scrap metal dealers</li> </ul>	Corporate annual reports filed	44,934
	LLC annual reports filed	140,730
	Notary registration/renewals apostilles	41,370
	Charity registrations (initial and renewal) and exemptions	7,562
	Trademarks	466
	UCC searches	616
	Charities examinations, investigations, and complaints completed	148
	Charities legal actions	289
	Securities registrations and renewals (firms/agents)	146,550
	Securities registrations and renewals (offerings)	28,438
	Securities legal actions (dispositions and opinions)	87
	Regulation and Enforcement registrations	583
	Regulation and Enforcement examinations/investigations/complaints	471

FEE INCOME: FY 2021	
Charities	\$547,484
Corporations	\$8,135,154
LLC Annual Reports	\$3,870,000
Notaries and Trademarks	\$340,835
Regulation and Enforcement	\$127,355
Securities	\$17,367,046
Uniform Commercial Code	\$2,768,139
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>\$33,156,013</b>

## COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLICATIONS

EFFICIENCIES	CATEGORY	OUTPUT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide publications required by statute</li> </ul>	Number of visits to the Secretary of State's website (includes visits to Y'all Vote)	14,842,739
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide accessibility of publications to constituents</li> </ul>	Number of visits to the Y'all Business website	60, 511
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compile and provide statistical statewide information</li> </ul>	Number of press releases issued	64
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase Agency transparency</li> </ul>	Agency publications produced	27

## ELECTIONS

EFFICIENCIES	CATEGORY	OUTPUT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote fair and honest elections by providing accurate election reports</li> </ul>	Lobbying reports	5,552
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Streamline campaign finance and lobbyist filings and reports</li> </ul>	Campaign finance reports	1,005
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide election training to county and municipal election officials</li> </ul>	Election training sessions	19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote increased voter registration and turnout</li> </ul>		

FEE INCOME: FY 2021	
Lobbying Registrations	
Civil Penalties from Lobbying	
Candidate Qualifying Fees	
<b>TOTAL: \$68,275</b>	

## PUBLIC LANDS

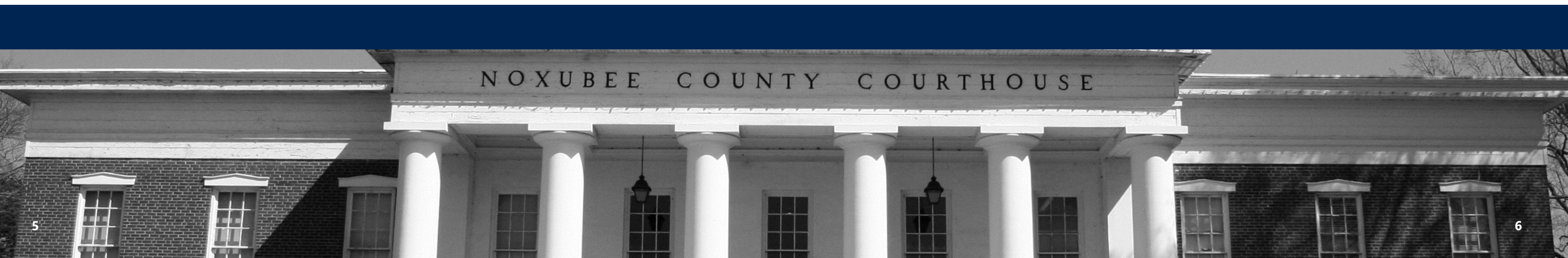
EFFICIENCIES	CATEGORY	OUTPUT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conserve, preserve, protect, and manage the public lands of Mississippi</li> </ul>	16th Section leases managed	13,783
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make all records of real property belonging to or under the control of the State of Mississippi available to the public</li> </ul>	Tax-Forfeited applications processed	13,000
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Streamline the electronic environment for sales and collection of data on public lands</li> </ul>	Tax-Forfeited patents issued	2,100

FEE INCOME: FY 2021	
Land Sales (Tax-Forfeited)	\$3,171,403
Land Sales Application Fees (Tax-Forfeited)	\$26,408
Tidelands	\$9,373,808
Tideland Assessment	\$2,640,615
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>\$15,212,234</b>

## ADMINISTRATION

EFFICIENCIES	CATEGORY	OUTPUT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor and improve internal controls/procedures to increase accountability for property and monies received</li> </ul>	Parcels of mail processed	57,521
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Upgrade technological systems to provide better constituent services</li> </ul>	Help Desk requests completed	5,489
	Payment vouchers processed	2,818
	<b>Additional Efficiencies: Turnaround Time</b>	
	Vendor payments	4.2 days



# BUSINESS SERVICES & REGULATION

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

## 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.

## NOTARIES PUBLIC

The Business Services & Regulation Division oversees all notaries public in the State and receives nearly 9,500 notary applications and renewals per year. 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.

## 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.

**67,000**  
Phone calls for business-related services answered in **under 30 seconds** by a live person

**36,046**  
Notary applications/renewals and apostille registrations

**631,256**  
Corporate documents and UCC's filed online, making the Division completely paperless

**40,000**  
Forms more than 38,000 new businesses annually

Online applications allow citizens to start a business or file an annual report online in a **matter of minutes**

**500**  
Issues or renews more than 500 trademarks annually

**12,000**  
Provides documents to more than 12,000 customers annually

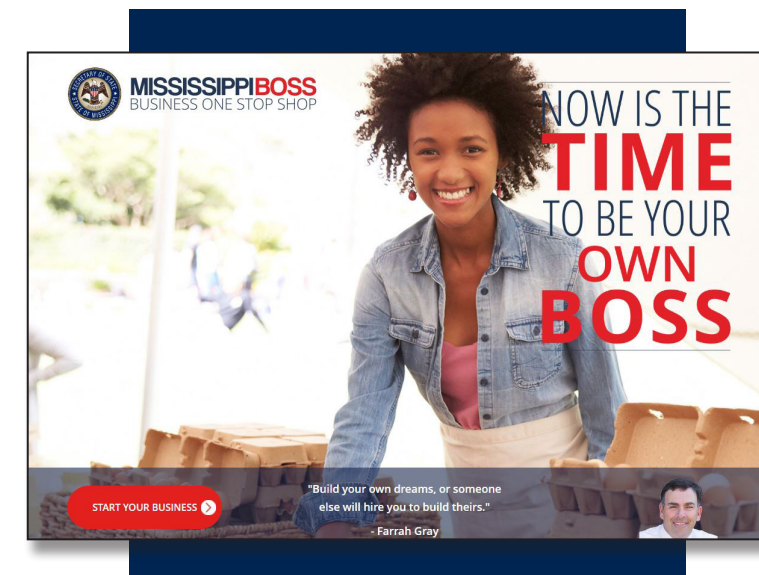
## Y'ALL BUSINESS

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, 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 randomly selected. Violators are subject to administrative fines, suspension of a license, or, in extreme cases, revocation of a license issued by the Division.

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.

## 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 Regulation and Enforcement 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 approximately 100 for-profit cemeteries in Mississippi which offer and market perpetual care to the public. An important task of the Regulation and Enforcement 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 worked cases throughout the State to assist consumers.

## 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 more than 1,000 regulation changes.

The screenshot shows a search interface titled "Administrative Bulletin Search". It includes a dropdown menu for "Agency Search", a text input for "Search Rule Summaries" with a red asterisk and the text "\*Does not search rule text\*", and "Order By" options: "System Number" (selected), "Ascending", and "Descending". There are also "Filing Type" options: "All" (selected), "Final", and "Proposed". A "Search Date" section has two date input fields and radio buttons for "Final Date" (selected), "Proposed Date", "Effective Date", and "Withdrawal Date". At the bottom are "Search" and "Reset" buttons.

## 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.

## 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. In connection, the Secretary of State's Office, in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Agriculture, law enforcement, farming interests, and metal dealers created the Mississippi Ag Theft Task Force to address the unique challenges of deterring and solving metal theft crimes in Mississippi's agricultural sector.



# 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, 38 such firms were based in Mississippi and registered with the Division. There were 47 state-firms based in other states that were also registered to do business with Mississippi residents. A total of 1015 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 2,994 investment adviser representatives.

In addition, there were 1306 broker-dealer firms registered in the State (2 are Mississippi domiciled and 92 have branches within the State) and 141,063 broker-dealer agents. Even during a year of COVID-19, the securities industry numbers continued to increase. With that increase came an increase in reports of scam and exploitation. The Division closed 79 securities investigations, 28 coming from vulnerable adult complaints. 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 19 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. Filings utilizing this online option continues to increase and in FY 2021 the Division processed 28,438 filings in total.

During FY 2021, the Division collected \$9,643,725.21 in offering-related filings, and \$7,658,350 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 2021, the Division worked 28 vulnerable adult cases.

**\$17,302,075**  
Amount of revenue collected in offering-related filings, registration filings for securities professionals and firms, and administrative enforcement cases

**146,550**  
Professional filings

**28,438**  
Offering-related filings

**87**  
Administrative enforcement cases

**38**  
State-based investment adviser firms now registered with the Secretary of State's Office

**79**  
Conducted investigations, which included possible securities laws violations

**1306**  
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 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.

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

## FOR YOUR PROTECTION

Under "Search Charities," the percentage of funds spent on all expenses are listed (program services, fundraising, and administrative). The Charities Renewal Filing Date is same as charity filing date with the Internal Revenue Service. 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.



**11,439**  
Charities registered or exempted with the Charities Division

# 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 maintains the Campaign Finance website allowing filers to download user-friendly Excel spreadsheets, input contributions and disbursements over time, and upload the information into the online report before deadline days. Contributions and disbursements can also be manually typed in the report online. The website has a second residual impact on the wider public: all reports filed online through the new system are searchable by candidate or political committee name, office, expenditure, or contribution. Late-filer reports are also available on the website. Campaign finance reports may be viewed online by the general public on the Secretary of State's website.

**8,739**  
Voter IDs issued as of June 30, 2021

**5,552**  
Lobbying reports

**1,005**  
Campaign finance reports

**1,492**  
County and Municipal Election Officials trained

**82**  
Poll Workers completed online training

**1,440**  
Voter registration updates via secure online website

**1,313,759**  
Of the **1,982,621** registered voters cast a ballot for President in the 2020 General Election

**20 observers**  
In 65 counties in the 2020 General Election

**15 observers**  
In 34 counties in the 2021 Primary Election

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

## 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.

## INITIATIVES

All proposed amendments to the Mississippi Constitution must be registered with the Elections Division of the Secretary of State's Office. The official ballot title and summary are prepared by the State Attorney General. Initiatives are only valid for one year, during which time a petition must be circulated to gather signatures to place the measure on the next statewide general election ballot.

## 82-COUNTY TOUR

Upon taking office, Secretary Watson made a commitment to meet with Circuit Clerks and Election Commissioners in all 82 counties. The goal of the tour is to build strong relationships, discuss voting-related issues and brainstorm ideas to help strengthen the overall elections process. Through his first two years, despite complications due to COVID-19 and the 2020 Presidential Election, he has visited 41 counties, with the goal of completing the remaining counties over the next two years.



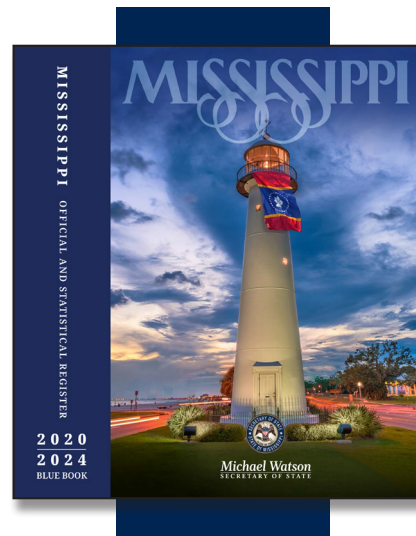
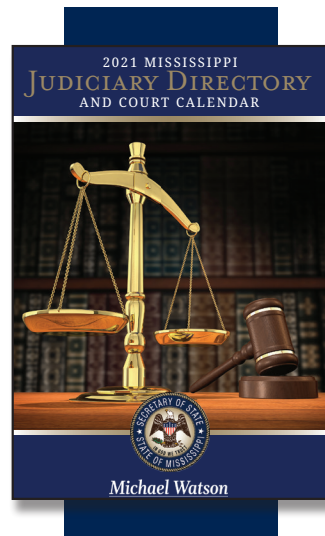


# COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLICATIONS

The Communications & Publications Division is responsible for responding to press inquiries, distributing press releases, and otherwise handling media and public communications. Our goal is to ensure 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

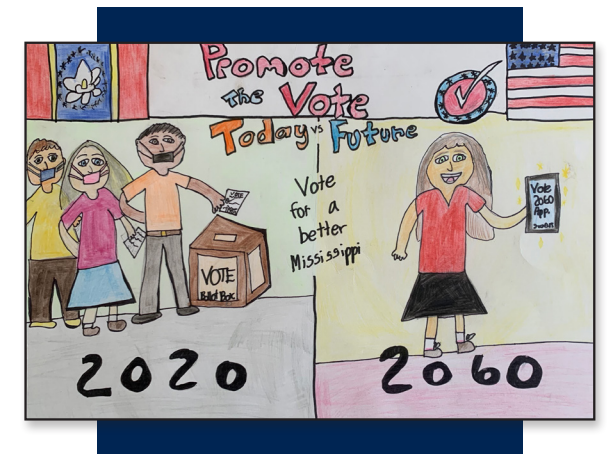
- AGENCY BROCHURES
- BLUE BOOK
- CHARITIES REPORT
- GENERAL LAWS
- GUIDE TO THE MAGNOLIA STATE
- HOUSE JOURNAL
- JUDICIARY DIRECTORY AND COURT CALENDAR
- LOCAL AND PRIVATE LAWS
- MY MISSISSIPPI COLORING BOOK
- SENATE JOURNAL
- STATE & COUNTY ELECTED OFFICIALS DIRECTORY



## PROMOTE THE VOTE

Promote the Vote is an annual, nonpartisan voter education program sponsored by the Secretary of State's Office to educate Mississippi students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 about the political process and civic duties. The goal is to encourage students to become informed citizens and voters as adults. The program includes classroom activities, art and essay contests, and a statewide mock election preceding every statewide general election. Our office partners with the Education arm of Mississippi Public Broadcasting (MPB) to encourage school, teacher, and student participation.

The 2020 theme, "The Future of My Vote," encouraged students to think outside of the [ballot] box and imagine what our state's overall election process might look like in the year 2060. After a tough judging process, 24 students from across the state were selected as 2020 Promote the Vote contest winners and recognized during a special awards ceremony at the Two Mississippi Museums in April 2021. We are extremely thankful for the students and school administrators who helped make the 2020 PTV program a success during an unprecedented school year.



## COVID-19 TIPS, RESOURCES AND RELIEF EFFORTS

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly impacted schools, businesses, and communities across Mississippi. In an effort to keep Mississippians safe and informed throughout ever-changing times, our Communications & Publications Division compiled a weekly email blast comprised of tips, resources, and relief efforts. We partnered with local, state, and federal agencies to ensure Mississippians received trusted and up-to-date information regarding the widespread health crisis. The email blast also served as an easy-to-understand resource regarding the numerous executive orders and emergency orders issued during Fiscal Year 2021.

## STAY CONNECTED

Facebook: @MississippiSecretaryOfState

Twitter: @MississippiSOS

Instagram: @Mississippi\_SOS

# 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 100 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.

The Public Lands Division strives to improve leasing practices for 16th Section land in order to receive the maximum rate of return for schools.

In 2018, the Secretary of State's Office, as State Land Commissioner, accepted an initial deed to a portion of 17,816 acres of land in Warren and Issaquena Counties. The property forms an "L-shape" around the Mahannah Wildlife Management Area; the Steele Bayou Flood Control Structure is located adjacent to the property. The State initially acquired approximately 10,000 acres with The Nature Conservancy acquiring the rest.

In 2019, former Secretary of State, Delbert Hosemann, accepted the next phase purchase from The Nature Conservancy of 2,246 acres.

In 2020, Secretary Watson accepted the second phase of approximately 2,263 acres.

In 2021, Secretary Watson accepted the final phase of approximately 2,225 acres.

The cost of the acquisition was paid through federal grant money and private donations.

**13,783**  
16th Section land leases

**\$59.1 million**  
Revenues from 16th Section leases \*\*

**\$22.8 million**  
Revenue from surface leasing

**\$11 million**  
Sales of timber/forest products

**\$6.0 million**  
Oil and gas royalty payments

99 of 99 school districts reporting for FY 2020.

\*\* All 16th Section land revenue stays with the local school district.

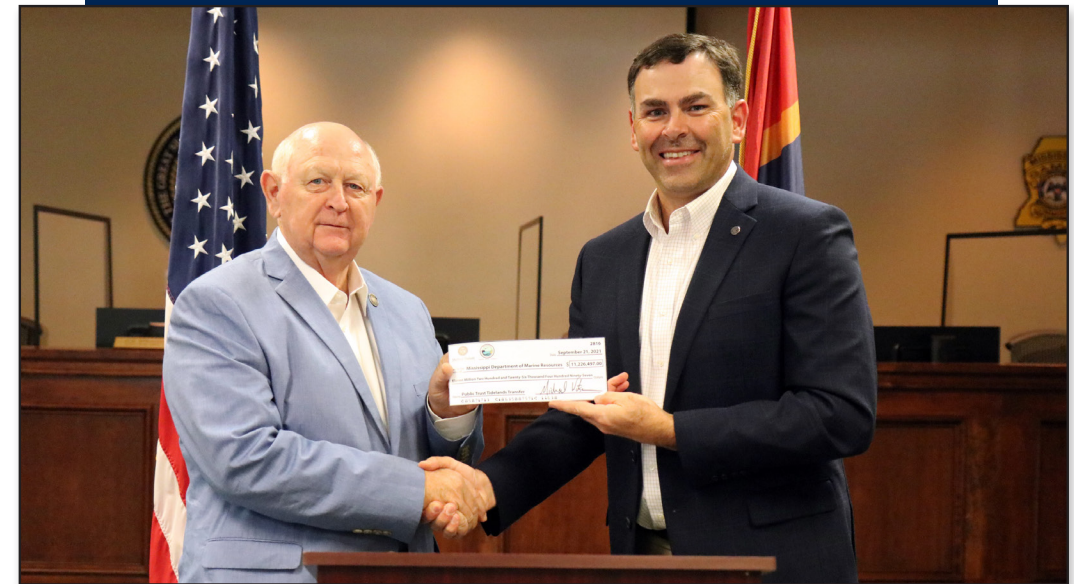
## PUBLIC TRUST TIDELANDS

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 ten 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 Executive Director Joe Spraggins with a check for \$11,226,497 representing the Public Trust tidelands Fund and Public Trust Assessment Fund total for Fiscal Year 2021.

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.

# PUBLIC LANDS

## 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 11,000 tax-forfeited lands valued at approximately \$50 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.

## FY 2021 AUCTIONS

### Hancock County Auction

Start date: May 5, 2021 – Closing date: June 2, 2021

### Jackson County Auction

Start date: July 7, 2021 – Closing date: August 4, 2021

## 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](http://sos.ms.gov).



More than **\$2.5 million** in FY 2021 property sales

Held **two** online auctions for tax-forfeited properties.

Tax-Forfeited lands can be transferred to governmental entities **without** cost for public use.

# 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, and directs the Agency's involvement in the Occupational Licensing Review Commission.

The Division developed legislation adopted by the Mississippi legislature during the 2021 regular session to reform laws governing Mississippi's LLCs, registered agents, perpetual care cemeteries, and constitutional amendment process as summarized below.

## HOUSE BILL

### HOUSE BILL 1177

This bill amended Section 1-5-7, Mississippi Code of 1972, to provide that the Secretary of State shall not provide copies of general laws and journals of legislative sessions to certain recipients unless specifically requested. It created a new statute, Section 23-17-42, Mississippi Code of 1972, to authorize the Secretary of State to insert into the constitution amendments proposed by initiative of the people or legislative alternative in the same way the Secretary of State inserts into the constitution amendments passed by the state legislature.

## SENATE BILLS

### SENATE BILL 2261

This bill amended various sections of Title 19, Title 21 and Title 41 of the Mississippi Code of 1972 as those titles relate to authorizing counties and municipalities to clean property of perpetual care cemeteries not properly maintained and to seek reimbursement.

### SENATE BILL 2204

This bill amended various sections of Title 79 of the Mississippi Code of 1972, to revise the LLC Act and Mississippi Registered Agents Act to require the listing of registered agents' email addresses.



The Secretary of State's Office continued to create meaningful change for small businesses and consumers through our Tackle the Tape initiative, which sets out to cut regulations that are anti-competitive and do not substantially further the safety of our citizens. Our Agency has always served as a premier resource for the business community, and Secretary Watson understands the impact burdensome red tape has on our state's economy. In the first year since its launch, the Tackle the Tape initiative has helped increase economic opportunities for all Mississippians by promoting competition and encouraging innovation and job growth. Secretary Watson was also able to pass an amendment to the Occupational Licensing Review Commission's submission process, which requires our state's licensing boards to submit regulatory impact assessments. These assessments measure the impact proposed regulations will have on businesses and consumers in our state.



## CONSERVATION TASK FORCE

The Secretary of State's Office recently launched our Conservation Task Force. Secretary Watson has brought the foremost public and private conservation advocates and officials together to construct and apply a comprehensive statewide conservation strategy. As Mississippi's Land Commissioner, Secretary Watson administers lands all over the state and is seeking ways to leave them better for the next generation. The Task Force is establishing goals and action plans that, when accomplished, will discernibly improve the cause of conservation in Mississippi across regions, topographies, and industries.

# AGENCY CONTACTS

## EXECUTIVE

**Secretary of State**  
Michael Watson  
Secretary@sos.ms.gov  
601-359-6342

**Chief of Staff**  
Carla Thornhill  
Carla.Thornhill@sos.ms.gov  
601-359-5122

**Assistant Secretary of State  
Communications & Publications**  
Kendra James  
Kendra.James@sos.ms.gov  
601-359-6349

**Executive Assistant to Secretary  
of State Michael Watson**  
Mary Madaline Timbs  
MaryM.Timbs@sos.ms.gov  
601-359-6342

**General Counsel  
Assistant Secretary of State  
Policy and Research**  
Leigh Triche Janous  
Leig.Janous@sos.ms.gov  
601-359-6318

## SUPPORT SERVICES

**Director of Finance and  
Administrative Services**  
Emily Tschiffely  
Emily.Tschiffely@sos.ms.gov  
601-359-9053

**Chief Information Officer**  
Mark Scutch  
Mark.Scutch@sos.ms.gov  
601-359-1331

**Chief Administrative Officer  
Human Resources**  
Lauren Tunberg  
Lauren.Tunberg@sos.ms.gov  
601-359-5509

## DIVISIONS

Business Services  
601-359-1633

Charities  
601-359-1599

Communications &  
Publications  
601-359-6344

Elections  
601-359-9412

External Affairs  
601-359-6327

Policy & Research  
601-359-6318

Lands  
601-359-5156

Regulation & Enforcement  
601-359-9055

Securities  
601-359-1334

## STATE OFFICES

Jackson Offices  
601-359-1350

New Capitol Building  
601-359-3123

Coast Office  
228-432-0541

## DIVISION TOPICS

16th Section Land  
601-359-6377

Apostilles/Notary  
601-359-1615

Campaign Finance  
601-359-1358

Cemeteries  
601-359-9055

Charities Search  
601-359-1599

Corp./LLC/UCC  
601-359-1633

Elections Hotline  
(800) 829-6786

Lobbying  
601-359-9412

Public Records Request  
601-359-1619

Publications  
601-359-1389

Scrap Metal  
601-359-9055

Securities Investigations  
601-359-1364

Tax-Forfeited Land  
601-359-5156

Tidelands  
228-432-0541



## Secretary of State's Office - FY 2021 Annual Report

401 Mississippi Street  
125 South Congress Street  
P.O. Box 136  
Jackson, Mississippi 39205  
601-359-1350  
[www.sos.ms.gov](http://www.sos.ms.gov)

Dedicated to being both a service and information agency.



**Michael Watson**  
SECRETARY OF STATE

