

Cody Mitchell Update continued from page 1

highlighting the documents that shaped American law and government. It also allows schools to establish volunteer chaplain programs to provide additional support for students. In South Carolina, we believe students should understand the full story of our nation's history and the principles that guided it. This bill reflects those values, reinforcing civic education, respecting our heritage, and supporting the next generation.

Last week, we advanced the Truth in Public School Grading bill (H.5073) out of the Education & Public Works Committee. Parents deserve transparency and honesty when it comes to their child's academic progress. This legislation ensures grading policies reflect real achievement and provide families with clear, accurate information, because high standards and honest feedback are essential to preparing students for success in college, careers, and life.

Supporting Our First Responders & Public Safety

Last week, the HALO Act (H.4763) advanced out of the full Judiciary Committee, sending a clear message that South Carolina backs the brave men and women who serve on the front lines. By establishing a 25-foot safety radius, this bill ensures law enforcement officers and first responders have the space they need to act quickly, decisively, and safely in high-pressure moments. It also strengthens penalties for those who harass, obstruct, or assault them while they are simply trying to do their job. When lives are on the line, interference isn't just disruptive, it's dangerous.

We also advanced a comprehensive Juvenile Crime Reform Package (H.4151, H.5120, H.5121) to crack down on serious youth violence and restore order in our communities. These bills ensure violent juvenile offenders face real consequences, strengthen coordination between schools and law enforcement when major crimes occur, and invest in prevention efforts that reinforce discipline and accountability. This is a firm but fair approach, public safety comes first, and serious crimes will carry serious consequences, no matter the offender's age.

In addition, the Immigration Enforcement bill (H.4764) passed out of Judiciary Subcommittee. This legislation strengthens cooperation between state and local law enforcement and federal authorities to ensure individuals who are in our country unlawfully and commit crimes are properly identified and processed. A growing number of law enforcement agencies across our state are already implementing these partnerships and taking proactive steps to uphold the rule of law — and that's exactly why we are working to pass this legislation statewide: to support their efforts and ensure every community has the tools it needs to keep families safe. Protecting our communities remains a core responsibility, and public safety will always come first.

Learn more about the growing number of Counties in South Carolina who are already implementing this program and working to keep their communities safe here.

Every vote we take is centered on one question: Is this good for the people of South Carolina? I remain committed to supporting our first responders, protecting our communities, strengthening our schools, defending our values, and growing our economy.

As always, I appreciate the opportunity to represent you and to keep you informed about the work being done in Columbia. I welcome your feedback and encourage you to reach out if you have any questions or would like more information on these or other issues before the General Assembly. To keep up with my legislative updates: Facebook Link: <https://www.facebook.com/ElectCodyTMitchell> Website: <https://www.codytmitchell.com/> Email: ctmitchellsc@gmail.com Phone #: (843) 332-5050

To keep up with the SC House Republican Caucus: SCHouseGOP Facebook SCHouseGOP Instagram SCHouseGOP X / Twitter SCHouseGOP Website

Distracted Driving Law continued from page 1

ear pieces; smart watches; CB, amateur, ham, and commercial two-way radios; subscription-based emergency communication devices; and prescribed medical devices.

Under the new law, you can't have your phone in your hand, on your shoulder, in your lap, or held or supported by any part of your body. The new rule doesn't apply if you're lawfully stopped or parked. There are other exceptions. You can use your phone, as long as you're not holding it, to unlock it or to initiate or end a hands-free call or a voice-based text; to listen to audio-based content; and to receive navigation, traffic, and road condition information. You may use your cell phone, in hand, to report an accident, emergency, or safety hazard to public safety officials.

The new offense is "Distracted Driving." First offense carries a fine of \$100.00. Second or subsequent offenses within three years carry a fine of \$200.00 and two points. The fines cannot be suspended or reduced.

"Distracted driving is a huge highway safety issue, and most distracted driving collisions involve cell phone use," said Sheriff Barry Faile. "People are injured or killed every day right here and all over the country because drivers are paying more attention to their phones than to the road. These collisions are preventable. Many years ago, we weren't required to wear seat belts. When the seat belt law was passed, we got into the habit of wearing them. Today, most of us buckle up as soon as we get into the car without even thinking about it. We can do the same with our cell phones. For the next six months, our deputies will be warning drivers seen using cell phones. We hope by next March folks will get the message so we don't have to write a bunch of tickets, and we'll all be safer on the road."

Update February 24, 2026

Drivers are reminded that beginning Saturday, February 28, 2026, deputies of the Lancaster County Sheriff's Office and law enforcement officers across South Carolina may begin writing tickets for violations of the South Carolina Hands-Free and Distracted Driving Act. For the last six months, police have been educating drivers on the new law by issuing warnings only. That ends Saturday, and drivers are encouraged to leave their cell phones and other mobile electronic devices alone while they're moving along the roadways.

Sheriff Barry Faile sees traffic safety as a major public safety issue. "Distracted driving causes collisions that hurt and kill people, and these collisions are avoidable," said Sheriff Faile. "Cell phone use behind the wheel is the major contributor to distracted driving. No phone call, text, or email is worth the loss of a life, and even a couple of seconds with your eyes off the road and on your phone can turn your life or the lives of others upside down. Please put your phone down while you're driving, buckle up, and obey speed limits so we all get where we're going safely."

South Carolina House Passes Bill to Strengthen the US Iron and Steel Industry

Columbia, S.C. — The South Carolina House of Representatives this week passed House Bill 4709, legislation designed to reinforce the use of American-made iron and steel in public projects across the state. The Iron Group, a coalition of U.S. iron and steel companies, applauds the House for advancing this important measure. H.4709 strengthens procurement standards to ensure taxpayer-funded infrastructure projects prioritize domestically produced iron and steel, helping support American manufacturing jobs, stabilize supply chains, and enhance national security.

"South Carolina continues to demonstrate leadership in protecting and promoting American manufacturing," said Bill Paxton, President for The Iron Group. "By prioritizing U.S.-made iron and steel in state-funded projects, H.4709 helps ensure our infrastructure is built with reliable, high-quality materials while supporting thousands of hardworking men and women in the iron and steel industry." State Representative Richie Yow, sponsor of H.4709, emphasized the economic and strategic importance of the legislation.

"We're putting America First right here in South Carolina," said bill sponsor Rep. Richie Yow. "Taxpayer dollars should be spent on American-made steel. This bill shows our pride in American workers — especially South Carolina workers, including those at Nucor — and our trust in American manufacturing. H.4709 keeps our dollars here at home, strengthens our job market, and reinforces that America was built on American steel. I'm hopeful the Senate will pass this bill unanimously and send a clear message to our workers: we trust you, and we trust your iron and steel." The iron and steel industry plays a vital role in the U.S. economy, supplying essential materials for roads, bridges, water systems, energy infrastructure, and defense applications. Ensuring domestic sourcing not only supports jobs but also reduces reliance on foreign producers and enhances long-term economic resilience.

H.4709 now moves to the South Carolina Senate for consideration. For more information about The Iron Group and its advocacy efforts, please contact: Bill Paxton at (817) 876-8891 or bpaxton@theirongroup.net.

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Anyone with information about any case should call the Lancaster County Sheriff's Office at 803-283-3388 and select Option 4 or submit a tip in one of the following ways: use the link www.p3tips.com or download the P3Tips mobile app available for both Apple and Android devices. Crime tips may be made anonymously.

Dancing with the Stars continued from page 1

-Albert Blackmon and Payton Griffin
-Jose Luis and Kennedy Fritz

AtAJMS, Dancing with the Stars is part of the Project-Based Learning Curriculum in our Dance Department. Project-Based Learning is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects. Dance students work directly with community volunteers to plan the choreography for dances and teach it to these adult dancers in the community. From the starting concept to the finished show, students are designing and teaching to create the performance.

AJMS Arts Steering Committee member, Cami Armbrust said, "DWTS is so much more than a fundraiser for the arts at our school. I've seen firsthand as a parent of 3 dance focus students how much this event means. The experience of choreographing and then teaching a dance to adults has ignited so much growth in all 3 of my daughters over the years. It's fun—sure—but it teaches responsibility, communication, healthy competition, and confidence!"

More information can be found on the Lancaster County Dancing with the Stars Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/>)

SNAP Fraud

continued from page 2

The Alabama Senate is currently considering a bill that would require state agencies to conduct monthly checks of other state databases to make sure SNAP enrollees remain eligible.

Buckner told state lawmakers that increasing eligibility checks for SNAP benefits would "shoot that error rate up, way up." The state's Legislative Fiscal Office estimated the additional work for both Medicaid and SNAP under the pending bill could cost \$16.7 million per year.

"Monthly reporting is not the answer to that, at all," she said.

But other states are looking at similar measures.

Lawmakers in states including Idaho, Kansas and Wyoming have introduced bills to require their state SNAP administrators to check eligibility of SNAP recipients more frequently. Missouri, Oklahoma and Utah bills would require verification of citizenship or legal immigration status before approving applicants for SNAP benefits. A Wisconsin bill would require the state's Democratic governor to bow to a White House demand to turn over state data on SNAP recipients.

And in Arizona, GOP lawmakers wanted to go even further than the new federal requirements. Last week Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs vetoed a package of Republican bills that would have required the state agency administering SNAP to get its error rate below 3% by 2030 or face financial penalties, and cut an additional 10% from its budget if the state failed to take corrective action.

States target fraud SNAP fraud has made state and national headlines in recent years, but there's not a broad consensus on the scale of the problem nor how to address it.

Some SNAP fraud is perpetrated by recipients who lie in order to get SNAP benefits for which they're not eligible. But there's also organized electronic SNAP theft, which involves thieves taking control of EBT accounts through electronic methods such as card skimming or cloning, bot attacks and phishing scams. Skimming is a form of theft where devices are illegally installed inside sales

SC Senate seeks to switch up gubernatorial appointments amid mass vacancies, lingering interims

By: Jessica Holdman

COLUMBIA — South Carolina senators are weighing solutions for hard-to-fill vacancies on the state's myriad governing and advisory boards with legislation that also seeks to close loopholes and strengthen checks on agency heads appointed by the governor.

A Senate panel opened discussions Thursday on a bill that eliminates the upper chamber's need to sign off on gubernatorial appointees to 35 citizen boards and commissions in the state that oversee a host of issues, such as publicly funded arts programs, foster care placements and state historical archives.

Most of the seats that senators would no longer need to confirm are on professional licensing boards for a plethora of careers, including barbers and real estate appraisers, social workers and podiatrists.

On the other hand, when it comes to the leaders of state agencies, the bill sponsor, Senate Majority Leader Shane Massey, wants to make sure the Senate is getting a say.

Interim appointments The Edgefield Republican's measure seeks to tweak the law governing the appointment of agency heads to ensure an interim appointment, as occurred in 2018, doesn't happen again.

Following that year's regular legislative session, Gov. Henry McMaster made former Attorney General Charlie Condon interim chairman of state-owned utility Santee Cooper. The Senate had chosen not to confirm McMaster's nominee. When McMaster put him in the chairman's seat anyway after the Legislature adjourned, the Senate sued.

Somewhat surprisingly, the state Supreme Court sided with McMaster, ruling he acted legally in his recess appointment.

"The Supreme Court ruling really screwed up the whole interim process," Massey said.

His proposal would spell out in state law that the governor can make interim appointments only if a position opens during the mid-May to January time period when the General Assembly is out of session.

"Things can come up and you need to allow for the continuation of government," Massey said. "So, there needs to be a process where a governor can make interim appointments. But there's also got to be a process whereby the Senate can respond."

The measure also would keep a nominee from being left in an interim role indefinitely. If the Senate doesn't sign off on an interim candidate before the end of the following legislative session, the spot is automatically vacated.

"An interim appointment should be interim; it shouldn't be a long-lasting thing," Massey added.

In the case of Condon, legislators told The Post and Courier their lack of action wasn't a green light for the governor.

"While we can understand the governor's frustration at the lack of consent for Mr. Condon, we cannot allow the end to justify any means — particularly when the means would upend the constitutional and statutory process," the late Senate President Pro Tem Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, said at the time.

The utility company's previous chairman, Leighton Lord, resigned amid a public feud with McMaster over the abandoned V.C. Summer nuclear project in rural Fairfield County.

More recently, frustrations have bubbled up between Massey and the governor's office over the appointment of a new state Department of Corrections chief,

terminals at a store and capture card data. That data is then used to make unauthorized purchases or steal from the victim's account.

In December, a longtime USDA employee was sentenced to two years in prison for her role in what the U.S. Department of Justice called a "sprawling fraud and bribery scheme" that generated more than \$66 million in unauthorized SNAP transactions. The same month, two Romanian nationals were indicted for their role in allegedly stealing more than \$160,000 in benefits in Oregon and elsewhere. In 2025, California reported more than \$100 million in stolen funds from California SNAP recipients' EBT cards.

States reported replacing more than \$360 million in stolen benefits from fiscal 2023-2025, according to federal data. Experts and state officials differ on

after the former prisons agency head was sworn in as U.S. attorney for South Carolina.

Massey claimed the governor declined to put interim director Joel Anderson, Stirling's deputy director, through the Senate confirmation process last May, when legislators were in Columbia. Instead, the governor opted to use the interim process, putting off Anderson's screening until this year.

"It appears to me that they have been dismissive of the Senate's role," Massey told reporters earlier this month.

Massey said he understands the governor's own possible frustrations with the speed at which the Senate acts on these nominations.

"But the Senate has an oversight check-and-balance role, and I don't like how that's been treated, especially in the last year," he said.

Administration hold-overs Also, as South Carolina prepares to elect a new governor come November, senators want to ensure any agency heads who may be held over from one administration to the next are vetted.

When McMaster moved from the lieutenant governor's office to the Governor's Mansion in 2017, following former Gov. Nikki Haley's appointment as United Nations ambassador under the Trump administration, he kept many of Haley's appointments in place.

Agency heads who stayed on when McMaster took over included Stirling, as well as directors at the departments of Commerce, Motor Vehicles, and Parks Recreation and Tourism.

Because they remained in their same jobs, they did not have to seek Senate approval. Massey's proposal would change that to require all gubernatorial appointed agency heads be renominated and re-screened.

Board vacancies Beyond agency heads, keeping seats full on South Carolina's vast and vague committees is a challenge for the state's political leaders, especially the governor, who's tasked with making most of the appointments, with the Senate's approval.

High-profile boards, such as the authority overseeing the state's port, have a long line of hopefuls. But vacancies can linger for lesser-known groups.

The Palmetto State has just shy of 300 such boards and advisory groups with about 5,000 politically appointed positions. A list maintained by the Secretary of State's office shows more than 425 vacant slots. Even boards without vacancies are stacked with people serving well beyond their prescribed term, left in what's known as holdover status, often for years.

The issue of board vacancies led McMaster in his 2025 State of the State address to call for the review and potential elimination of the state's more than 40 professional licensing boards, handing oversight directly to the state's licensing agency.

The General Assembly ultimately did not oblige that request.

Instead, Massey is suggesting legislators address the issue in another way, by eliminating the paperwork barrier that often holds candidates back.

Many of these board members are not paid for their time beyond covering travel expenses.

The Senate screening involves a financial and criminal history check and public hearings. The governor's office previously told the SC Daily Gazette that it's common for applicants to drop out once they find out about the six-month to year-long procedure.

Discussions on the bill are expected to continue in a Senate Judiciary subcommittee next week.

whether recipients or organized crime rings are the biggest threats to SNAP. But since the federal government stopped reimbursing stolen SNAP benefits at the end of 2024, more states are looking at ways to address fraud.

States including Arkansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma and Virginia are joining Alabama and California in rolling out chip cards to make it harder for skimmers to steal SNAP benefits.

"SNAP fraud is rampant," said Royal, of the United Council on Welfare Fraud. "If anybody tells you that there's not SNAP fraud out there, they're trying to pull the wool over your eyes. It exists in all 50 states. It is definitely a plague on the taxpayers."

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