

Business is Strong

Industry leaders reporting banner year, but worker shortage remains concern as recruitment and retention are challenges



By JACK CRISS

The Mississippi construction industry is riding a wave right now, with those reached for this Special Report reporting record years and believing that the growth trend will not only continue in 2025, but also grow.

While the private sector continues to supply a steady stream of work to the industry in Mississippi, public work is also strong with stimulus money still in the mix and the assistance of many new state programs designed to “build up” the workforce for the construction and other industries.

Laying The Groundwork

As an example, Governor Tate Reeves and AccelerateMS, in collaboration with the Mississippi Apprenticeship Program (MAP), the Mississippi Department of Employment Security (MDES), and the Central Mississippi Planning and Development District recently announced two transformative initiatives aimed at strengthening Mississippi’s workforce: the Mississippi Apprenticeship Accelerator (MAA) and Mississippi Reconnect. These programs will play a critical role in closing skills gaps, providing career pathways, and driving economic growth across the state.

“This is another win for Mississippi’s workforce development efforts,” said Reeves, upon the announcement at Build Mississippi’s training facility in Pearl. “I’m proud of what we’ve been able to accomplish when it comes to workforce development in our state—it’s led to thousands of Mississippians getting better jobs and helped us reach an all-time low



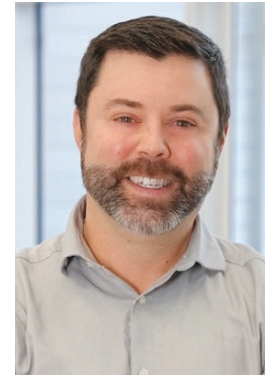
Adam Harris



Annie Rogers



Austin Hudson



Brent Bean

unemployment rate. With the record-breaking private sector we’re witnessing, it’s important that we continue investing in Mississippians. That’s exactly what we’re doing.”

The Mississippi Apprenticeship Accelerator (MAA) program is designed to empower businesses by helping them create and expand Registered Apprenticeship (RA) programs. With an

initial \$2 million investment, the MAA program will support approximately 600 new apprentices, offering them customized on-the-job training and classroom instruction in high-demand, high-wage occupations.

“Registered Apprenticeships are a proven way to help businesses grow their talent pipelines while offering

businesses of all sizes, with a focus on sectors critical to Mississippi’s economic future, such as advanced manufacturing, construction, healthcare, and information technology. Participating businesses will have the opportunity to create RA programs that meet their specific workforce needs, with MAP providing expert guidance from concept to implementation.

Pre-apprenticeships will also be encouraged in collaboration with local education institutions to ensure a steady pipeline of talent.

“Through this initiative, we’re bridging the gap between the skills businesses need and the career pathways available to Mississippians,” said Bill Ashley, Executive Director of MDES. “This program is a win-win for our economy and our workforce.”

Mississippians meaningful, high-paying career opportunities,” said Courtney Taylor, Executive Director of AccelerateMS. “The Mississippi Apprenticeship Accelerator will enhance our ability to provide critical workforce training across the state, ensuring our businesses remain competitive and our workforce continues to thrive.”

The MAA program is open to

In addition to the MAA program, AccelerateMS is introducing the Mississippi Reconnect program, aimed at re-engaging unemployed and underemployed residents. This initiative provides access to short-term training programs, typically lasting up to eight weeks, designed to equip participants with the skills needed for priority occupations in sectors such as agribusiness, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, information



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technology, construction, forestry, and energy.

“Mississippi Reconnect is an opportunity for our state to invest in its people,” said Taylor. “By offering targeted and accelerated training programs in high-demand industries, we can help Mississippians secure stable, well-paying jobs while addressing the workforce needs of our growing economy.”

The first award under the Mississippi Reconnect program was granted to the Central Mississippi Planning and Development District (CMPDD). The \$4.4 million funding will be utilized to provide training for over 900 individuals, addressing the region’s critical workforce development needs, especially those in construction and advanced manufacturing.

This initiative aims to enhance skills and employability, ultimately driving economic growth and supporting the state’s demand-driven workforce development strategy. CMPDD will collaborate with Build Mississippi, Hinds Community College, Holmes Community College, and employers to ensure the training programs align with industry requirements and create pathways to sustainable employment opportunities for participants.



Chris Solop



Courtney Taylor



David Carroll



Lloyd Munn

Local workforce development areas, community colleges, and higher education institutions will play a pivotal role in delivering these short-term training programs, providing critical education and career advancement opportunities for Mississippi residents.

Both the Mississippi Apprenticeship Accelerator and Mississippi Reconnect initiatives underscore AccelerateMS’s commitment to preparing the state’s workforce for the future, ensuring that both businesses and workers can thrive in today’s competitive economy.

Lloyd Munn, Executive Director of the Associated General Contractors of Mississippi (AGC of MS) headquartered in Jackson, applauded such moves and said that it aids what his organization does for its membership, which is substantial.

“Among other things, we monitor ongoing legislation that affects our people, provide safety training, offer networking opportunities and help our members in any way possible,” said Munn, noting that AGC of MS has close to 300 members.

Munn said that workforce training and retention is the “hot topic” in the industry right now, not only in Mississippi but nationwide. The aforementioned programs the state are working on and putting forth will help, he said.

“Some of the best jobs in Mississippi—in America—are in the construction industry,” noted Munn. “It’s imperative and incumbent upon us in the industry to drive that point home to the young people, starting even in high school. My quote about the situation is, ‘It’s a career; not a paycheck and a Friday night.’ It’s not

a temporary job. Construction work is a career and can be a very long one with good pay and great benefits.”

Munn said he also like to get out the message out that construction is as safe and professional as any industry out there today. “The way these jobs are built today, they’re safer, there’s better equipment—and our Mississippi contractors are producing work and buildings as good as anything else out there in

America,” he said.

Brent Bean, President of the aforementioned Build Mississippi—originally formed in 1996 as the Mississippi Construction Education Foundation—with offices in Pearl/Jackson and on the Gulf Coast, said his organization’s mission is to grow the construction industry and to train workers once they enter the field. “That’s in a nutshell, of course,” said Bean. “We also promote the industry on many levels as well, the educational part of our mission.”

Build Mississippi is funded through the State Board of Contractors from annual commercial contractors licensing fees with no state tax dollars involved, said Bean. “It’s interesting and ironic, but years ago we discovered that about 60 percent of our funding was actually coming from out of



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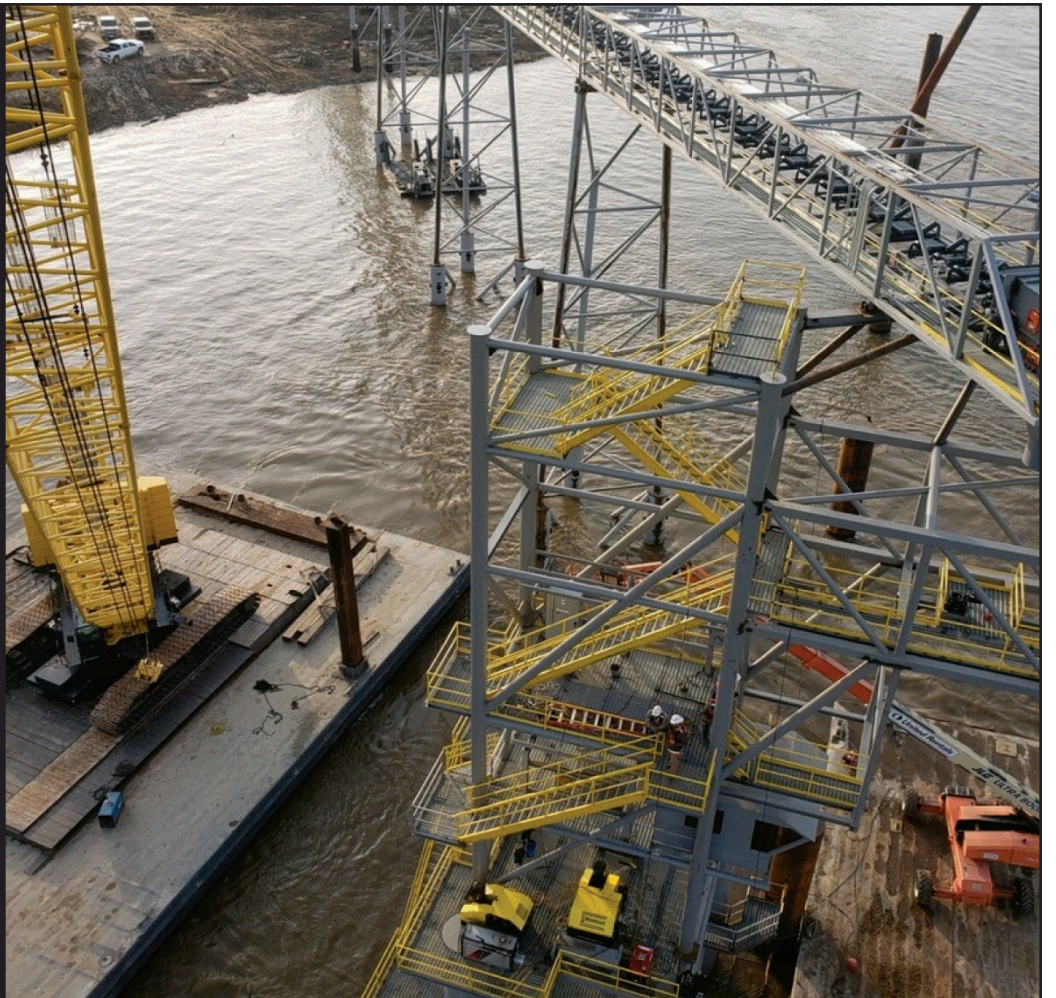
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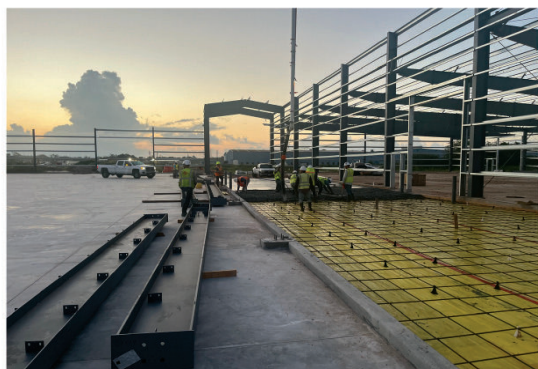
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state contractors coming into Mississippi to do business," he noted.

Build Mississippi also acts as the supervisors for all construction programs in public school career and tech centers across the state through a partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education. "In 2024, we were in 106 such centers providing national job certification to over 6000 high school students," noted Bean. "That's up from about 4200 just five years ago. It's tremendous progress and we're excited about what the results will be for the construction and related industries as far as job creation."

Doing The Work

"2024 has been a great year for us," said Brad Fountain, President and CEO of Fountain Construction, Inc. in Jackson, a position he has held for the past 23 years. "Revenue and margins are up, our workload has been steady and manageable without having to add many employees."

"We completed the 20-million-dollar renovation of the old Holiday Inn Southwest for The Pearl Senior Living Home. This project cleaned up one of the major bights on the Highway 80 corridor in southwest Jackson," said Fountain, of some of the recent projects his company has handled. "We also completed a complete replacement of the HVAC system at Jim Hill High



Phillip Davis



George Malouf, Jr.



Wes Winborne

School and Capital City Alternative School, several major projects at University Medical Center, eight Rootdown cannabis dispensary projects and facility renovations for Puckett Rents."

2025 is shaping up to be another really good year, noted Fountain. "We will complete the Jackson Planetarium addition and renovations and will be starting in January on two major HVAC projects for Jackson Public Schools at Hardy and Powell middle schools, three new projects at University Medical Center including the new Burn Unit, along with projects at Millsaps College, Mississippi College, Alcorn State, MS School for the Deaf and Blind, U.S. Army ERDC in Vicksburg, and new facilities for several private owners in the Metro area."

The biggest challenge Fountain said he will face going forward is lack of skilled labor. "This will cause us to be very selective on what additional projects we can take on. But, I believe the construction industry in Mississippi has fared very well in recent years, particularly 2023 and 2024. The challenges of material and labor shortages has been difficult to deal with and has caused project durations to lengthen and costs to rise, but the demand for construction services has remained strong. The federal dollars supplied through the AARPA and ESSER programs has provided a steady source of some nice public projects."

George Malouf, Jr., President of Malouf Construction with its home office and operational headquarters based in Flora now for the past year, as well as an office

in Greenville, said that firm has been working projects stretching from the Gulf Coast to northeast Arkansas.

"We've worked a couple of large bridge jobs, one at Grenada Lake and we were just rewarded a MDOT job for a bridge over the Sunflower River, that we'll be breaking ground on soon," said Malouf. "2025 looks to be an extremely busy year for us. We're at about a 50/50 mix between public and private work for the firm, but it's looking like more private money is going to be freed up in the new year."

Malouf Construction is also working on a Corps of Engineers and two out of state wildlife area management public projects, added Malouf. "In central Mississippi, we're seeing some spin-off infrastructure work from the AWS data center, including a pump station for Amazon and some clearing for the Madison County Economic Development Authority. We're also going to be working on a new fire station for that area," he said.

Malouf said the construction industry is doing well in Mississippi. "For Malouf Construction, 2024 was a record year for us, in fact. There's a lot of work out of there for us and it's gotten even more competitive than usual among the firms. There's a higher workload now and a greater demand for boots on the ground which, unfortunately, is an issue the industry is having to face. We certainly

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need to make some hires here, but they're hard to find."

MidState Construction's Austin Hudson, who is the president of the firm located in Jackson, agreed that the past year was extremely strong for the company. He said that MidState is actively involved with a couple of major projects with the University of Mississippi Medical Center, including the tenant build-out of their Ridgeland medical office building, around 70,000 square feet. "It was a fast track project and we are actually going to finish up earlier than expected. Also for UMMC, we're working on the Frizell Children's Project in Jackson, a ground-up project that's going to be a good job for us."

Hudson added that the firm is doing a good bit of retail work in central Mississippi as well as some public work, such as the new Madison City Hall. However, MidState's workload is close to 85 percent private.

"We deliberately try to stay within the Metro Jackson area with our workload as much as possible, but recently we've worked on projects in Meridian for Mississippi State University," said Hudson. "MidState also has work in the pipeline for 2025 and expect it to be as good as last year. There's no shortage of work. Actually, the company has had some of its better years lately and I don't see that stopping for us or for the industry as a whole here in the state."

The dwindling of the labor force for the construction issue is the biggest challenge Hudson said that he and his peers in the industry face. "Workers are retiring and it's harder to recruit new, younger talent although I have seen a shift in that recently. I think that's fantastic. Some people are suited for working with their hands and I do think that now more younger workers are realizing they can make a good living in our profession and not have to necessarily take the college route," noted Hudson.

David Carroll, owner of DCS Contracting (or DC Services) headquartered in Oxford, will celebrate its tenth year of business this new year. "We're a mid-sized general contractor and primarily work within a certain geographical area in north Mississippi and the Delta, mainly jobs in new construction and renovations for commercial projects," said Carroll.

DC Services has been engaged in a variety of public/private work over the past year, said Carroll, including a renovation job at the penitentiary at Parchman as well as medical facility jobs closer to home in Oxford. "We also do civil and utility work in-house for clients which has become a big part of the company's niche and a big part of our identity," he said.

Carroll said that he anticipates a strong 2025 for not only his company, but the industry as a whole.

"Much of our work is public, and stimulus funds are still in play in that arena," added Carroll. "That's been a tremendous boost to the construction industry. But, with interest rates hopefully dropping soon, I foresee strong private sector growth."

Benson Companies, a family-owned general construction multi-organizational based company in Ridgeland, provides general and masonry contracting, development, and design-build work throughout the state, as stated by Rick Benson, co-owner.

"One of our specialty areas of construction has been working with medical groups to facilitate projects to meet their needs and practice while working within a cost-effective strategy. We have a strong diverse group of clients and developing strong relationships with many physician groups has led to our success over the last 20 plus years. Many of our projects do include a large component of masonry which comes from a long background of history instilled in our company by our father who was a masonry contractor in Jackson since 1946," said Benson.

"Our diversity over the years has also been a key to our success not only with commercial and masonry construction but also with property development, design-assist with architectural firms, and

facility management of properties we construct. Knowing how the project was developed and constructed helps tremendously in knowing how to manage and maintain the facility for the end use owners we work with," he said.

Benson continued, "In thinking about the future, the market along with increased construction costs, have a large impact on the success of projects and our overall business plan. Our business and the construction industry are highly susceptible to higher interest rates of which appear to be stabilizing in order for more projects to come to fruition. Even with working with increased costs, 2025 looks to be good for our company with several projects on the books."

Phillip Davis, the Executive Vice President of Codaray Construction with offices in Ridgeland and Hattiesburg, said that the company has grown rapidly since being founded in 2017. "We're exploring possibly open some offices in markets out of state, as a matter of fact," he said. "But our footprint is strongest in Mississippi."

Davis added that the growth has to be managed properly and that's part of Codaray's philosophy. "You can't lose sight of the relationships you build with your existing clients and you can't get too big for certain-sized, important projects. I think that's a lesson that most of us in the industry know but it's sometimes lost.



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About two years ago, we set up a separate division of the business called Commercial Services to take care of the corporate clients who make up the majority of our repeat business in order to stay focused on their needs.”

Retaining and recruiting employees are concerns at Codaray as it is with every other contractor in the state, said Davis. “So when we do make a new hire, the focus goes to training and developing their talent—you have to do that these days. There’s a noticeable difference in skill sets and our industry has to do the best job we can to get the younger generation caught up and more productive than we have in the past. That’s also due to a lot of the Baby Boomers retiring, which is happening with greater frequency on a regular basis.”

Davis believes that the mega-projects that are taking place in the state and being built will add to the growth his company and the entire industry is seeing right now.

“The stimulus money that has been so prevalent the past few years will slow down at some point soon, but I think the ancillary work from the AWS site, for instance, will benefit us all,” he said. “However, it will add strain to our labor pool. So, while there will be growth in the future we’ve got to do the absolute best we can in recruitment and retainment and there are positive steps being taken.”



Legal issues

“Clients remain concerned with worker shortages. Moving forward, clients should be concerned about the potential for tariffs that could create supply chain issues and inflation. We expect to see contract language that allows for renegotiation in the event of pricing impacts beyond certain parameters as “hot topic” in the near future.” This is according to Adam Harris, an attorney with Phelps Dunbar LLP in the firm’s Gulfport office.

“We aim to keep our clients apprised generally about issues that are important to them through regular firm bulletins on a myriad of issues and especially those involving construction, tax and

employment,” said Harris. “Also, we are mindful of developments whose impacts may be limited to certain of our clients and we keep our affected clients updated on those also.”

Generally, everyone has been busy and the climate has been good, he said.

“We have noticed an uptick in bankruptcy cases, some of which we have handled by our bankruptcy group and bankruptcy filing by others which have impacted our clients,” continued Harris. “There is an unsettling undercurrent of poor pay and bankruptcies that leaves one to wonder about the real strength of the construction market and especially the ability of small businesses to get affordable credit.”

Christopher Solop, a member with Biggs, Ingram & Solop, PLLC in Ridgeland, leads the firm’s Construction Litigation and Government Contracts section. “One of the biggest concerns I’m hearing from our construction business clients is simply getting paid on a timely basis,” said Solop. “Overall, the industry has done a good job with ensuring timely payment on state project, but private payment continues to be an issue. Fortunately, contractors and subcontractors now have lien right, which does provide them with some leverage to get paid.”

One thing that Solop emphasized is that contractors, subcontractors and suppliers must make sure to thoroughly review contract documents in advance of signing. It is important to make sure what the payment terms and what remedies are available if payment is not received in a timely manner.

“Even having the right to stop work on a project for non-payment the Prompt Payment statute does give a contractor and subcontractor some relief. However, when you’re not being paid on a project and just receiving interest, it’s just not enough for a business. This applies to both the prime and the sub-prime contractors. Moreover, fighting to get what little interest on a late payment is frequently not cost effective.”

An attorney needs to review all

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contracts any construction company in advance and make sure satisfactory remedies are in place for non-payment. “If not, they could end up financing the entire project,” said Solop. He added the problem is not rampant in Mississippi but does occur frequently and needs to be headed off at the pass.

Additional Factors

Annie Rogers with Lemon Mohler Insurance Agency, a company established in 1947 with three offices on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, works as an independent agent for insurance companies to provide coverage to businesses such as contractors.

“We represent our clients to the marketplace, but also argue for them on their behalf in the marketplace, as well,” said Rogers. “If a claim goes wrong for whatever reason, we can assist and act as advocate for the client. We provide that local, person service to our clients as opposed to calling a 1-800 number, for example. I spend most of time on the job traveling and meeting with my clients providing assistance where needed, including resolving problems.”

With commercial insurance, Rogers said that clients such as those in the construction industry are looking for experts who know their fields. “They want specifically about their particular issues and challenges,” she said. “And I’m the



Construction Specialist here at Lemon Mohler. I work with a number of construction firms here in Mississippi.”

Rogers said that recently, she has seen an increase in exclusions and limitations on coverage that are being placed in policies.

“And that type of issue is usually not at the top of a policy. It can easily go unnoticed in the fine print,” she said. “So, past the line items, a lot of companies don’t notice the risk exclusions slipped in at the bottom that might be included. I can actually dig into that, sometimes looking over 400 pages of policy or more, to determine what a particular policy really covers.”

After such a process, Rogers can then make recommendations and offer options to clients based on her findings that could seriously affect their businesses. “We put control back in the contractor’s hands,” she said.

Accountability


Wes Winborne, Managing Partner of Construction Services with HORNE in Ridgeland, has acted as past president of the Construction Industry CPAs/Consultants Association, past president of the MS Chapter of the American Subcontractors Association and several other groups relating to construction in his role as a CPA with the firm.

“Mississippi contractors face a unique business climate,” said Winborne. “Opportunity is not the issue, but ensuring you’re well-resourced to capture opportunity presents challenges. These challenges include workforce shortages, rising material and labor costs and increasingly complex compliance requirements. Building and retaining strong teams remains a significant issue in this tight talent market, making leadership development and workforce engagement essential. Plus, economic uncertainties and regulatory changes, like Beneficial Ownership Information (BOI) reporting, add pressure.”

Mississippi contractors should be aware of several critical accounting issues as they plan for 2025, advised Winborne.

“Contractors adopting sustainable practices or investing in innovation may benefit from credits like the R&D Tax Credit or energy-efficient building incentives,” said Winborne, naming several. “Compliance with ASC 606 for long-term projects remains vital for accurate revenue reporting. Changes to Mississippi’s tax laws may affect State and Local Tax (SALT) planning, especially for contractors with multi-state operations. And, finally, uncertainty currently surrounds the 2024 federal requirements necessitating proactive compliance to avoid penalties.”


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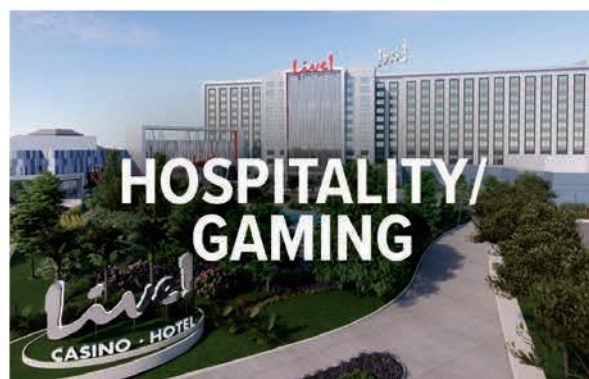
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