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# 2025 Story of the Year: Municipal elections bring turnover, surprises

By Bayne Hughes Staff Writer

Dec 27, 2025

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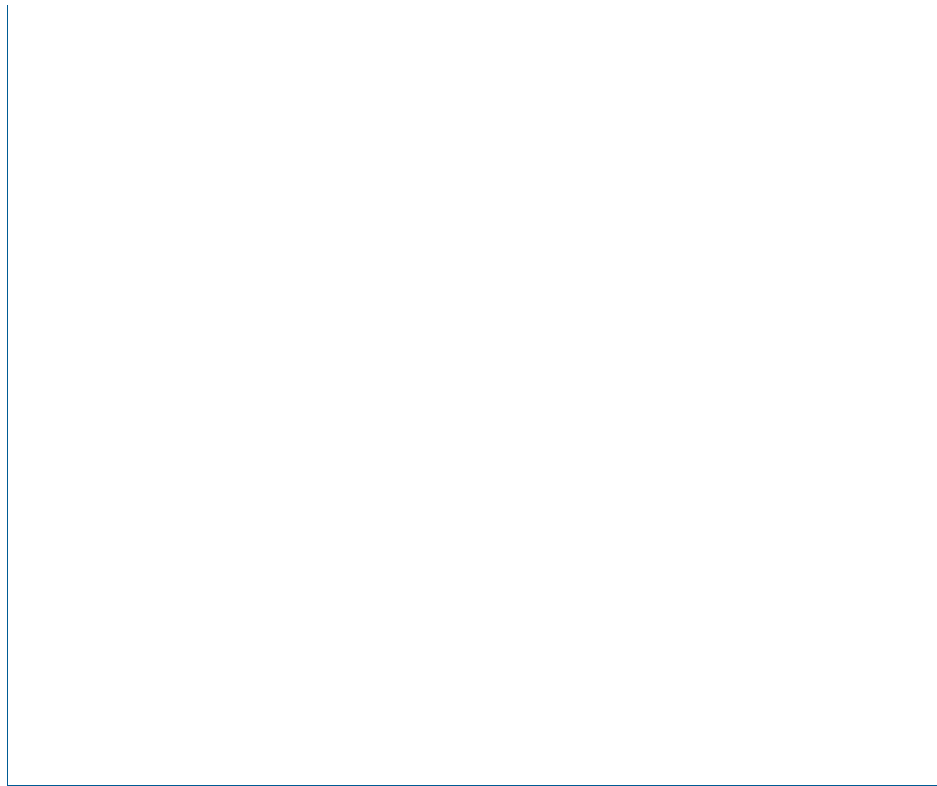
Each of Decatur's 16 ballot boxes were coming in on the night of Aug. 26. A few came in early, but then most seemed to arrive all at once.

One thing became apparent as the numbers added up. Kent Lawrence was winning, and he was winning big.

Lawrence said recently that he "felt good about the race," but it wasn't until the numbers started coming in that he realized he was Decatur's new mayor and he was winning without a runoff.

The former owner of an electrical business and McDonald's official would defeat three other opponents to become Decatur's next mayor.

The 2025 municipal election is The Decatur Daily's story of the year as Decatur, Hartselle and Moulton each elected new mayors to run their cities.



Athens had three candidates for mayor, but incumbent Ronnie Marks won easily without a runoff to claim his fifth term over Limestone County's largest city.

Don Kyle, who served two terms as Decatur mayor, said every election is different, but the “turmoil” of the previous term was an indicator that the 2025 municipal election might be crazy.

Kyle pointed out the previous term included several controversial issues. The biggest one was the Sept. 29, 2023, shooting death of Steve Perkins by Decatur Police Officer Mac Marquette, who was indicted for murder. He pleaded not guilty and is currently appealing to the state Supreme Court a Circuit Court ruling that he is not entitled to immunity.

Kyle said Mayor Tab Bowling, who chose not to seek a third term, was involved in some of the controversies, like operating an illegal short-term rental at his home, walking out of City Council meetings and refusing to attend the annual State of the City.

“I don’t recall that kind turmoil two or three years before an election in the past,” Kyle said. “I think this stirred up, or least stimulated, other people to run for office who might not have done so otherwise.”

While candidate announcements started to flow early in the year, the 2026 election cycle officially began with qualifying on June 10.

The final qualifying day of June 24 was only a preview of things to come. Dwight Jett Jr., who was completing his seventh term as the District 4 Decatur City Schools board member, qualified for another run but withdrew on the last day of qualifying.

This left newcomer Alberto Miguez as the only candidate to qualify in the District 4 race. Miguez became the first Hispanic elected to the DCS board.

District 4 Councilman Hunter Pepper, the city's youngest-ever elected official, paid his \$50 fee and qualified for the mayoral race after announcing he planned to seek reelection.

But, less than an hour later, Pepper dropped out "to prove a point." He said he wanted to show that it's too easy to qualify for the mayor's race.

This left four candidates qualified to run for mayor after two-term mayor Tab Bowling chose not to run again. District 1 councilman and local businessman Billy Jackson chose not to seek an eighth term after serving almost 29 years on the council, instead pursuing the mayor's seat.

Retired grocer Butch Matthews entered the mayoral race for the fourth time. Television station owner/personality Suzie Wiley also qualified.

Four of the five council races had competition, including five candidates in District 4 and six in District 1. The school board only had one race with competition.

Wiley's husband passed away midway through the campaign. However, she forged on, attending a candidates' forum at Cook Museum of Natural Science just days later in early August.

It became apparent the Decatur mayor's race was a two-man affair between Lawrence and Jackson at the Cook forum when they were the only two candidates heavily questioned by the attendees.

Jackson and Lawrence also had the largest number of volunteers campaigning for them.

“I felt good early but, in the last few weeks, you know I honestly got worried,” said Lawrence, who had 40 people campaigning for him.

Lawrence called election night “exciting” as he watched the numbers roll in with a throng of supporters.

While Lawrence got 6,201 votes, or 54.16%, to win outright and Jackson got 4,898 votes, or 42.78%, of the total, the race wasn’t settled on election night.

“I don’t think Ms. Wiley or Butch were viable candidates, so it made sense that Kent could win without a runoff with only two people,” Kyle said.

Rumors began to circulate after the municipal election that some candidates' names in the Decatur’s mayoral race weren’t on some ballots. Maurice Ayers filed a lawsuit in Morgan County Circuit Court on Sept. 4 seeking an injunction to void the election.

The complaint had eight voters' affidavits attached, most claiming that mayoral candidates Lawrence and Jackson were included on their ballots, but Matthews' and Wiley's names were omitted at two polling sites, Decatur Baptist Church and St. James Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

One affidavit claimed Jackson was the only candidate listed. Ayers' belief was that the addition of the two names omitted could have thrown the election into a runoff.

However, Morgan County Circuit Judge Stephen Brown issued a two-page order on Sept. 12, dismissing the complaint before the defense could respond.

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## **Council races**

With incumbent Kyle Pike running unopposed, District 2 was the only council race decided before the election.



Despite three of the four races having more than two candidates running, District 4 was the only council race to end up in a runoff with Sarah French finishing first and Pam Werstler second out of five candidates.

The runoff became particularly contentious for French, who was attacked on social media after it became public that she had pleaded guilty to Class C felony possession of marijuana in 2001.

Questions lingered on whether French was eligible, but they were never answered. Werstler erased the election deficit and came back to win the runoff with 562 votes, or 62.86%, and French received 332 votes, or 37.14%.

District 3 incumbent Carlton McMasters faced challenger Mike Faruqi but easily won a second term.

Despite having five candidates, District 1 got a new councilman to replace Jackson with Terrance Adkins winning without a runoff. Adkins had been banned from City Hall for alleged misconduct during his protest over the Perkins case at a council meeting. The city lifted the ban after his election.

“I would have bet no one would win (in District 1) without a runoff because so many candidates ran, and I would have lost the bet,” Kyle said. “Adkins must have run an excellent campaign and had a reputation and/or was well-known in his community. He also stayed consistent with his message.”

The new mayor, council and school board were sworn in and took office on Nov. 3 at a ceremony at Ingalls Harbor Pavilion. The council then elected Pike as council president and McMasters as president pro tem.

In Hartselle, incumbent Mayor Randy Garrison faced former Hartselle Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Missy Evans and David Lewis Witt.

Evans won Hartselle’s mayoral race, defeating Witt and two-term incumbent Garrison without a runoff. Evans received 1,758 votes (52.03%), Garrison had 1,503 votes (44.48%) and Witt got 118 votes (3.49%).

Place 1 was the only Hartselle City Council seat to end up in a runoff as Ashley Thompson and Austin Baker finished first and second, respectively. Baker came from behind to win the Place

1 runoff.

The Hartselle City school board also had major changes with four newly elected members — Bruce Wilhite, Anna Holland, Dana McCutcheon and Richie Nagel.

In Athens, incumbent James Lucas won the only runoff as he defeated Henry White for District 3 councilman.

The Moulton mayoral race was one of the largest, with six candidates entering the race. Ryan Jolly won the race against longtime Mayor Roger Weatherwax in a runoff.

In the race for Moulton District 1, four names were on the ballot for the Aug. 26 election: Danny Morris, Marsha Thrasher Farris, Raegen Hurst Eaves, and incumbent Joyce Jeffreys.

Morris received the highest number of votes, 38. Farris and Eaves both received 23 votes. As a result, all three moved on to the runoff. Jeffreys had 15 votes.

In the runoff, Morris again received the highest number of votes with 39 out of 98 total ballots cast for him, or 39.8%, in District 1. Eaves had 36 votes, and Farris had 23. Despite not receiving a majority, Morris won without a second runoff based on a prior state Supreme Court opinion.

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