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nardino, California, one that was reportedly perpetrated by ISIS sympathizers.

And Trump isn't alone in thinking the government needs to keep tabs on Muslims, as an early December Winthrop Poll showed that 67 percent of likely Republican voters in South Carolina think the government should conduct surveillance on mosques, with 48 percent supporting the creation of a government database of all Muslims in the U.S.

While it is clear there is a section of society, particularly here in South Carolina, that harbors significant fear and distrust of Muslims, a diverse group in the Palmetto State is seeking to push back against those feelings and foster harmony among those of different faiths.

Members of Interfaith Partners of South Carolina gathered Dec. 29 at the State House to discuss a number of topics, including January's Interfaith Harmony Month, for which Gov. Nikki Haley recently issued a proclamation.

Interfaith Partners of South Carolina is a statewide organization that brings together people of different faiths, including Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Unitarian Universalists, Pagans and others.

A key segment of the Dec. 29 gathering was a statement from IPSC that was read by the organization's Carl Evans, a retired former longtime professor in the University of South Carolina's Department of Religious Studies. The statement specifically touched on religious freedom and the organization's support of Muslims.

The statement took aim at "political leaders and candidates" who "espouse retaliation" toward all Muslims for the actions perpetrated by a group of extremists.

"We affirm our solidarity with our Muslim friends here in South Carolina, whom we have come to know as peaceful, community-minded, law abiding citizens," Evans said. "We abhor the vilification they and their religion now suffer in the rhetoric of political candidates and others who spew misinformation, hate and fear."

Evans says he was troubled by the recent Winthrop Poll results, which showed a high percentage of South Carolina Republicans want Muslim mosques to be monitored.

"That is a very regrettable development, that one particular religious group would be singled out, contrary to the basic principles of what it is to be an American, what our democracy stands for," Evans says. "For one group to be singled out for that extraordinary scrutiny is, for us, completely unacceptable."

Chaudhry Sadiq is a Muslim and the president of the Peace and Integration Council of North America. At the State House gathering, he condemned the acts of terror perpetrated by extremists and insists those acts do not represent all of the nearly 1.8 billion Muslims in the world.

At the same time, Sadiq rejected some of the vitriol toward Muslims espoused recently by certain politicians, namely Trump.

"The rhetoric that we hear all the time is simply unconstitutional, unethical and un-American, period," Sadiq says. "[Trump] aspires to be the president. He is a presidential candidate. A person with such thinking and such narrow-mindedness, I believe, honestly, does not even deserve to be a community leader."

Holli Emore is the executive director of Cherry Hill Seminary, which provides education and practical training in Pagan and nature-based spiritualities. In addressing the idea of harmony between those of different beliefs, she says there is often a misconception that understanding other people's faith will lead to a weakening of one's own set of beliefs.

"Some people fear that the interfaith movement will neutralize their religion in some way, or that, if they are involved, somehow they will lose their beliefs," Emore says. "The fact is, people all over this country and the world have found that interfaith understanding and activities have actually enhanced and strengthened their own religion."

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148 statehouse report

ANALYSIS by Bill Davis

Flag Still a Problem for SCGOP

Looks like the controversy over taking down the Confederate flag from the State House grounds earlier this year isn't over.

Several Republicans in the House and Senate — and from both sides of the issue — say it could shape primary races across the state, but primarily in the conservative rural areas of the Midlands and Upstate.

With many primaries serving as de facto elections, the lingering impact of the flag could shape the future of the General Assembly, too.

Over the summer, Gov. Nikki Haley took a bold stance on the flag, which had been flying for years in a prominent place in front of the State House, after a racially inspired shooting at Charleston's Emanuel AME church took the lives of nine parishioners. Included among those murdered was state Sen. Clementa Pinckney (D-Jasper), who was leading a Bible study when the tragedy occurred.

Haley won the day. But will her victory cost incumbent Republicans their seats in the upcoming year, especially in an election year

during which lawmakers will also consider a controversial proposal to raise the state gas tax to cover the costs of huge infrastructure and roads projects exacerbated by this fall's historic flooding?

Long may it wave

Freshman state Rep. Christopher Corley (R-Graniteville) viewed sending an annual Christmas card to fellow Republicans as an opportunity to stir the cauldron. The front of the card featured a picture of the flag still flying in front of the State House.

On the back was a holiday message that included the line: "May you have a blessed Christmas, and may you take this joyous time as an opportunity to ask for forgiveness of all your sins such as betrayal."

Corley says he purposefully sent the card to coincide with his pre-filing a bill for the coming legislative session that called for a non-binding referendum on where the flag should be displayed.

Corley says it doesn't matter if his bill ever makes it to the floor, "because I've already made it an election issue for everyone





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Photo by Thomas Hammond

running for a seat in the Legislature.”

In an interview in which Corley said the true cause of the Civil War was economic domination by the North and not slavery, he said that while the flag might not be the “centerpiece” of some campaigns, it will play bigger in the rural Midlands and Upstate races, where conservatives are angry their elected officials “caved.”

Corley claims many seated GOP members in the House and Senate who voted to take down the flag will see increased opposition as a result.

“Lots of ‘splaining”

Count Florence resident Will Breazeale as one of those rallying around the flag as the centerpiece of his campaign the House District 63 seat currently held by fellow Republican Jay Jordan, who was elected in April.

Returning the flag to the grounds is the first plank in his campaign platform, which calls to defend “our Southern Heritage from further attack.”

Like Corley, he’s heard of a handful of names planning to run on a flag-friendly platform against incumbent Republicans, including against Senate leaders like Judiciary Chair Larry Martin of Pickens and President Pro Tempore Hugh Leatherman of Florence.

State Sen. Lee Bright (R-Roebuck) says the coming session’s vote on the gas tax, combined with a vote to take down the flag, could spell real problems for his fellow Republicans.

“Opposition for you will be pretty strong in a primary if you’ve got those two votes on your resume,” said Bright, who opposed removing the flag. “You will have lots of ‘splaining to do.”

Attacked from all sides

Martin voted to take down the flag. Last week, with the state facing decades of needed

infrastructure funding to shore up roads and bridges, Martin said he’d vote for “some sort of a gas tax” as long as it helped everyone across the state, and not just for big projects favoring one region.

Martin says that “rarely” do single votes cost legislators their jobs, but that combined with other issues, like slack constituent services, it could help topple a leader.


He says that during the recently completed “holiday parade” season, some constituents yelled out some “not very nice things at me about the flag.” But, Martin added, “You can never get every vote.”

Influential political scientist Scott Huffmon says that while more candidates may come out of the woodwork angry over the flag issue, it remains to be seen whether they will “truly speak for the majority of conservatives of a district.”

Huffmon says the political calculation surrounding the gas tax might be more dangerous for those representing conservative districts than the flag issue.

“People are not opposed to raising tax money for roads projects in the abstract, but when they get to counting how many cents per gallon, then all of a sudden they’re against it,” says Huffmon. “All [that] a savvy Republican candidate challenging an incumbent has to say is ‘he voted to raise your taxes,’ and you’ve got a built-in primary message.”

Huffmon says that unless “something was destroyed by the flooding or someone they know died, it’s amazing how fast things fade in the public’s memory.”

Except for the Confederate flag. 

Bill Davis is senior editor for Statehouse Report; reach him at bill@statehousereport.com. Statehouse Report also publishes a weekly opinion column by Andy Brack. Let us know what you think: Email news@free-times.com.





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148 What a year it has been in and around South Carolina

Let's have a round of applause for the year that was as it moves almost completely into the rearview mirror.

Now, a question: Is that a fond goodbye, or is this good riddance?

We sense it's a little of both.

We have started rewinding the local news in the morning News. On Saturday, we kicked off a nine-part series with a look at the biggest business stories of the year.

Today you can look back at the year in government, and you also can see what we consider some of our pictures of the year. We had tough choices. To see many more lasting images from 2015, see a photo gallery at scnow.com.

In the days ahead, we will look back at the year — in entertainment, education, crime and sports. We will remind you of some of the good people who have passed away this year. We will end the series on Jan. 1 with a look ahead to 2016.

These top-five lists are subjective. Perhaps you would rank stories in a different order. Maybe you could think of something that we didn't include. Think of it as a conversation starter if not a second draft of history.

As you can and will see, it has been a newsy year in Florence and the Pee Dee, but it has been nothing like other parts of the state.

South Carolina was the epicenter for news in 2015.

A resident's video of a police officer shooting an unarmed man in North Charleston was a big story, but a bigger story was to come.

Nine people were massacred by a gunman in June during a prayer service at a historic AME church in the heart of Charleston. One of the victims that bloody evening was S.C. Sen. Clementa Pinckney. President Barack Obama delivered the eulogy at the funeral in Charleston, but Pinckney was buried in Marion, where he was from.

Family and friends of the nine victims expressed forgiveness toward the shooter, a 21-year-old man who had complained to friends about black people "taking over the world." Other hot spots in the past year have erupted in violence. Charleston and South Carolina were a model for grace and mercy. We are proud of that.

A touching prayer vigil was held two days after the shooting at Mount Zion AME Church in Florence. Many civic and religious leaders spoke movingly about the need to unite and behave.





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Soon S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley and S.C. Rep. Jenny Horne, a Republican from Summerville, played key roles in persuading state lawmakers to vote for taking the Confederate battle flag off the grounds of the Statehouse.

Just when you thought the news couldn't get any bigger than this, it started to rain in the fall, and it didn't stop until it seemed much of the state was underwater. Parts of the Pee Dee were hit hard. Columbia and the Midlands were hit harder. Recovery continues.

In regard to business, Florence and the Pee Dee had a good but not great year. Expansions were a bigger story than new industry. The announcement that Roche will be fading away was disappointing.

Downtown development and redevelopment has been a big ongoing story. It was big news last year. It will be big news next year. It's exciting news.

On the government front, the big story was the extraordinary consolidation of state power in the Pee Dee, with Sen. Hugh K. Leatherman Sr., F-Florence, being elected the president pro tempore of the Senate and Rep. Jay Lucas, R-Hartsville, being elected the speaker of the House. Local governments shined during and after the floods.

Florence School Districts 1, 2 and 3 got new superintendents in 2015. Randy Bridges is nearing his first anniversary as the FSD1 superintendent. He seems to be off to a good start.

On the local entertainment scene, the Francis Marion University Performing Arts Center and the Florence Civic Center both had impressive years. A summer concert series featuring Kansas, Christopher Cross and Bruce Hornsby was the highlight of the PAC season. The headliners at the Civic Center included bluegrass star Ricky Skaggs and soulful Mary J. Blige.

In sports, the big stories were NASCAR racing on Labor Day weekend at Darlington Raceway and Dillon High School winning a fourth consecutive state high school football championship.

What will 2016 bring? It's an election year, starting with presidential primaries. We are likely to see a parade of candidates in the next two months. Oh, boy.

Ruiz Foods will crank up production at its facility. FMU will complete its health and sciences complex, which has been named the Luther F. Carter Center for Health Sciences. Leatherman and Lucas will try to get their chambers to agree on a plan to fix the state's crumbling roads and bridges. Dillon High will seek a fifth consecutive state championship.

But 2015 is going to be a tough act to follow.

Unsigned editorials represent the views of this newspaper. Editorial board members are Joe Craig (regional publisher), Don Kausler Jr. (regional editor) and John Rains (news editor).



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148 Teachers won't be judged on tests

The Associated Press

COLUMBIA — Teachers won't be judged by their students' scores on end-of-year tests under a proposed revamp of South Carolina's educator evaluation system.

State Superintendent Molly Spearman announced her proposal this week after Congress' overhaul of the No Child Left Behind education law, signed last week. The new federal approach to accountability no longer ties teacher evaluations to results on statewide testing, allowing South Carolina to change course.

Spearman wants to work with educators to develop a new evaluation system that instead incorporates tests taken throughout the school year. Districts would have leeway in which tests they use.

The idea is to design an evaluation process that's helpful to teachers instead of one written to meet federal requirements, said Kris Joannes, director of the agency's office of educator effectiveness.

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Teachers

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"The intent is to give ongoing feedback to teachers instead of a system that invokes fear in high-stakes tests," she said Tuesday. "Looking at student growth is right, but we're going to do it thoughtfully" and develop useful training.

Teacher advocates said the proposal provides relief after years of angst over evaluations that over-emphasize results on end-of-year standardized tests.

"Evaluations should not be based on how a child does on one test on a particular day," said Kathy Maness, director of the Palmetto State Teachers Association. She said the proposal benefits students too by easing pressure on them "to do well on one particular test. It's better to look at the whole student than a snapshot."

The evaluation system's statewide implementation this school year coincides with new education standards as well as new statewide tests, adding to anxiety over the evaluations' fairness. The federal government had denied the state Education Department's request to delay implementation.

However, while all of South Carolina's public schools are using the system in which stu-

dents' scores on high-stakes tests make up 20 percent of teachers' evaluations, results don't yet count for personnel decisions. No teacher will receive an "unsatisfactory" or "needs improvement" rating this school year.

Next school year is when test results are supposed to start counting in ratings.

But Spearman will ask the State Board of Education next month to extend the reprieve until the system's replaced.

"What Superintendent Spearman is laying out makes common sense," said Bernadette Hampton, president of the South Carolina Education Association, adding she's pleased that Spearman plans to get teachers' input in developing the plan.

Board Chairman Michael Brennan said he fully supports Spearman's proposal.

"I'm all in on this one," said Brennan, president of BB&T for South Carolina and Gov. Nikki Haley's appointee to the board, adding he's never liked the idea of evaluating teachers based on annual tests.

"There are just too many variables and factors that impact that outside of how well the teacher is teaching," he said. "I wouldn't do that in my business. I wouldn't evaluate employees on what they do on one day or what their colleague does in a single day."



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¹⁴⁸Deadline approaching for retroactive diploma requests

BY MELISSA ROLLINS
Morning News
mrollins@florencenews.com

FLORENCE — Former students of Florence School District 1 who did not receive their diploma might have a chance to do just that, but not much longer.

After the passage of Act 155, signed into law in April 2014 by

Gov. Nikki Haley, students who met all of the requirements for graduation but did not pass the exit exam could petition to receive their diploma. The deadline for the petition is Dec. 31, 2015.

Beginning with the class of 1990, any students in South Carolina who were unable to pass the state exit exam and therefore failed to receive their diploma

can receive it by petitioning the school district that they were attending at the time of their would-be graduation.

The district must be able to determine that all graduation

requirements were met. If they were, the petition will be sent to the South Carolina Department of Education.

S.C. Superintendent of Education Molly Spearman said in a release that thousands of individuals have been able to receive their diploma because of the passage of Act 155.

"We have given out nearly 6,000 diplomas to qualified individuals," Spearman said. "These people met every requirement for a high school diploma except for passing the exit exam. Receiving their diploma has now opened up job opportunities and doors for career advancement."

Spearman said that with the deadline quickly approaching, interested parties should not wait to get their petition in.

"I encourage all potential candidates for a high school diploma

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Diploma

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under Act 155 to petition their local school board by the deadline of December 31, 2015," Spearman said.

Florence 1 Assistant Superintendent of Instruction

Randy Koon said that since the law was put into effect, 200 people have applied for a diploma. Of those requests, 160 individuals met the requirements and received their diploma; Florence 3 has approved 87 requests.

Individuals interested in submitting a petition can

find an online directory of South Carolina school districts on the Department of Education's website, ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/schools/, with contact information for each.

There is also a Frequently Asked Questions page, ed.sc.scdoe/assets/File/agency/pe/documents/

[FAQs-Act155.pdf](#), for more information about Act 155 and what the requirements are for graduating in South Carolina.

After the local school board approves the petition, it can take four to six weeks for the individual to receive his or her diploma from the state.