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VOLUME 142, No. 33
SUNHERALD.COM

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SUNDAY JANUARY 25 2026

\$5.99

SunHerald



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Senior citizens play pickleball at the Lobouy Senior Center in Harrison County on Wednesday, Jan. 14, 2026.

Retirees driving population growth on Mississippi Coast

BY MARTHA SANCHEZ
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The retirees playing their usual pickleball games at the Lobouy Senior Center seemed like longtime friends on the court.

But their backgrounds tell a different story: Many are newcomers from Louisiana and California, Oregon and Illinois.

"You immediately feel welcome," Eileen Manning, from Chicago, said as balls bounced back and forth on the courts behind her. "I just like the kindness."

The pickleball group at this rural senior center in Harrison County is one sign of a striking shift unfolding across the Mississippi Coast. The number of residents who are 65 and older is rising faster than any other age group in the region and driving more population growth than any demographic across the three coastal counties.

Many are also migrating here. The age group's population on the Coast has grown by about 11,000 people in the last

few years, according to estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau. They are empty-nesters and wanderers, RVers and boat owners, and some say they are avoiding the increasing cost of crowded Florida.

They are being lured by Mississippi's promise of cheap retirement in some of the last affordable beach towns in the country.

The ranks of seniors keep swelling. Real estate agents say they are selling more retirement houses and second-homes that become full-time residences. Attendance is rising at all seven of Harrison County's senior centers, which are open to residents 60 and over. Jeff Clark, the executive director of Harrison County Senior Services, said demand for transportation has increased so much in the last year that the program has gotten two new buses.

Leaders also say some newcomers from the Mississippi Delta and other parts of the state are retiring on the Coast, where healthcare systems are better. Others are seizing the new opportunities of remote



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Neil and Pam Pickering pose in front of their airplane behind their house in Diamondhead on Friday, Jan. 16, 2026.

work to spend their last professional years near the water, logging on from home offices, before they retire.

"I have people calling me at age 55," Clark said. "There's a huge interest."

RETIREES DRIVE MS COAST'S POPULATION GROWTH

The Coast is growing even as

most other places in Mississippi shrink. Newcomers from other states are helping drive growth across the coastal counties, and Census data shows they most often arrive from Louisiana, Texas and Alabama. Thousands also move here from other parts of Mississippi.

Some discover the region

SEE POPULATION, 3A

James Beard chef nominees: Who in South Mississippi made the list?

BY MARY PEREZ
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Nominees for the James Beard Foundation awards for the best restaurants and chefs in the country are out, and one chef in South Mississippi made the list.

Austin Sumrall, owner/chef at White Pillars in Biloxi was nominated for Best Chef South, which includes Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana and Puerto Rico.

The only other nominee from Mississippi is Hunter Evans at Elvie's in Jackson, who is nominated in the same category.

The 2026 James Beard Awards Ceremonies will be handed out June 13-15 in Chicago.

In 2025, Tresse Sumrall and Austin Sumrall were nominees for best chefs in the South and

SEE NOMINEES, 3A

The Downtowner boasts big changes in new restaurant

BY MARY PEREZ
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GULFPORT

The line that formed Wednesday in downtown Gulfport to buy Loblolly Bakery king cakes soon will become a line to be the first inside The Downtowner when the new restaurant opens later this year.

The former Triplett-Day pharmacy and lunch counter is being transformed into The Downtowner, a cross between a diner and a family restaurant, at 2424 14th St. and U.S. 49 in the middle of downtown Gulfport.

"We're shooting for late spring. Be on the lookout," owner Robert St. John said in his latest video update.

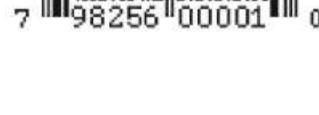
The interior has changed

SEE RESTAURANT, 3A



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