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MEDIA RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Explore Stone County Receives “DMO of the Year” Award from Mississippi Tourism Association

For media photos and assets associated with this release visit this [Dropbox Link](#).



STONE COUNTY, Miss. Oct. 8, 2025 -- The Mississippi Tourism Association (MTA) awarded “Explore Stone County” as the 2025 recipient of the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) of the Year award. The award was announced at MTA’s annual Governor’s Conference held at the Vicksburg Convention Center last week.

Explore Stone County is the tourism arm of Stone County Economic Development Partnership (SCEDP). The award, for organizations with budgets under \$500,000, recognized Explore Stone County’s overall tourism effort as “best in class” since launch of a new brand and campaign “Hidden Gems Await” in 2024.

The recognition highlights outstanding achievement in destination marketing and management through effective strategies and initiatives that increase visitation and contribute to the overall success of the community.

“We are honored to recognize these outstanding professionals whose dedication continues to elevate their communities and our entire industry. Each award reflects not only remarkable individual achievement but also the strength and momentum of Mississippi tourism. As we look ahead, I’m inspired by the talent, passion, and collaboration that will continue driving our state forward and growing our economy,” said MTA Executive Director Danielle Morgan.



The annual educational and professional development event brought together around 250 tourism industry professionals from across the state, as well as tourism partners from the surrounding region. These awards allow MTA to recognize members who excel in various sectors of the industry. Awards were presented in 20 categories, each focusing on a different aspect of the hospitality industry or individual achievement.

Explore Stone County's brand and campaign, launched in 2024, set out to do something its community had never done before: build a destination marketing brand entirely from the ground up. This new identity, born from months of listening, research and a deep love for Stone County's culture, turned the idea of "*Explore Stone County: Hidden Gems Await*" into more than a brand. Inspired by the signature mosaic outdoor art Stone County is known for, the new brand became a promise to visitors and locals that every corner of the county holds something worth discovering.

The campaign also included vibrant signage, bold statewide placements, custom event branding, and an engaging digital presence that connects with travelers where they are. A new website welcomed tens of thousands of visitors, significantly increasing website traffic. A new e-newsletter out-performed industry benchmarks, and paid ads reached millions across search, social, and streaming platforms.



The campaign's logo (shown here) is in the shape of one of the murals in Blaylock Park in Downtown Wiggins and embodies the essence of Stone County's landscape – long-leaf pines, creeks, camping and rolling hills.

"This award celebrates the dedication our team has put into showcasing Stone County as a premier tourism destination," says Layla Essary, Executive Director of Stone County Economic Development Partnership. "Our county's natural beauty and outdoor attractions have always been a draw, and with strong support from local businesses and state parks, we're now offering more places for visitors to shop, stop, eat and play."

To bring Stone County's personality to life also meant sharing the stories that make it shine within the *Gems of Stone County* campaign. Launched a year ago, this series highlights Stone County residents whose spirit and dedication exemplify the county's small-town charm. Each story opens with an anecdote illustrating what it means to be a "gem;" someone remarkable, unique and rare. These stories appear online each quarter and are shared on social media and in the *Stone County Enterprise*, to celebrate the people behind the places. The stories give potential visitors a



chance to connect with Stone County on a deeper level and help to unify the community. The Gems stories can be found at this link: <https://explorestonecounty.com/news-blog/>



The Explore Stone County brand and campaign were developed working with The Focus Group, an agency based in Biloxi chosen in a competitive RFP process with the express goal of increasing visitation to Stone County. The firm took an immersive approach to capture the essence of the County and its people. They continue to work in Stone County to build upon that foundation and expand the campaign with new

photography, videography and new tactics to reach more potential visitors.

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Stone County's tourism initiatives through the Stone County Economic Development Partnership (SCEDP) are partially funded by a 2% tax on gross proceeds of sales derived from restaurants and lodging. The new tourism campaign is supported in part with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds which are focused on driving visitation from outside of Mississippi and were allocated through the State Legislature as a result of initiatives of the Mississippi Tourism Association.

Captions for photos in release (and in Dropbox link at beginning of release):

Image 1: Explore Stone County "DMO of the Year" award

Image 2: (l to r) Rochelle Hicks, Director of Tourism, Visit Mississippi; Layla Essary, Executive Director, Stone County Economic Development Partnership/Explore Stone County; Lt. Governor Delbert Hosemann.

Image 3: Explore Stone County brand/logo

Image 4: Stone County Gems logo

Image 5: (l to r) Rochelle Hicks, Director of Tourism, Visit Mississippi; Tami Blackwell, Intrinsic Media; Allison Buchanan, The Focus Group; Layla Essary, Executive Director Stone County Economic Development Partnership/Explore Stone County; Lt. Governor Delbert Hosemann; Jena Case, The Focus Group; and Stacy Thunelius, The Focus Group.