



Okaloosa County Continues to Prosper Under Conservative Fiscal Leadership and Community Support

In 2014, when I first became a commissioner, Okaloosa County had a minimum level of funds in reserve for disasters and other rainy days. We now have the recommended level of reserve funds to achieve a strong financial rating and obtain low interest financing. This has been an intentional effort by a fiscally conservative Board of County Commissioners. These reserves also allow us to be financially resilient during a hurricane. We watched our neighboring County need a tremendous reserve to address the devastation of Hurricane Michael

This fiscal year, our tax rate is 3.8308, and has been since 2017. I am proud to report that our current tax rate is one of the lowest tax rates in State of Florida. While I am proud of our low tax rate and strong financial stability, I am especially thankful for the quality projects and services we provide with those financial resources. Below are just a few examples.

PROJECTS

Southwest Crestview Bypass

Our roads continue to be the number one issue in Okaloosa County and your Board of County Commissioners is working to make a difference in every area of our county.

The single largest project in Okaloosa County history, the Southwest Bypass around Crestview, is well underway. This project would not have been possible without the County's half cent surtax, and our partnerships with the City of Crestview, the Florida Department of Transportation and Triumph Gulf Coast.

Additionally, as part of the by-pass project, the County has initiated efforts to work with FDOT for installation of a new interchange with Interstate 10. Furthermore, the County has partnered with FDOT, and County personnel are coordinating with Eglin AFB personnel, to discuss concepts for an eastern by-pass route as well.

Brooks Bridge replacement

Brooks Bridge is under construction and expected to be complete in 2026. It will be 10' higher, 6 lanes wide and allow for elimination of the traffic currently at the eastern foot of the bridge. Upon completion of this project, the only traffic light on Okaloosa Island will be found at the Convention Center / Boardwalk intersection.

Multi Modal Bike Path

Construction of the 12 ft wide Bike path from Brooks Bridge to Marler Bridge will begin on the South side of Hwy 98 early next year. Technically, the Hwy 98 right-of-way is on Eglin Air Force Base property. We are working hand-in-hand with our military partners to finalize the plans and permitting. Construction costs will be paid with a combination of \$4 million dollars of tourism/bed tax money and a \$2 million-dollar legislative appropriation for the five mile segment.

DEPARTMENTAL INFORMATION

Parks:

Okaloosa County maintains over 40 Parks, and most of them are hidden gems. A new guide will be coming out soon which will provide information about the parks and their amenities including boat launches, picnic areas and paddle boarding. The beautiful *Women Veterans Monuments* are accessible from the Okaloosa Island Convention center and a walk in this park is a lovely way to enjoy Choctawhatchee Bay. The Audubon Society has found over 248 species of birds and a heron rookery in this location. This park is a rare treat, enjoyed by locals and tourists alike, and is not to be missed.

Law Enforcement:

We are proud of the men and women in uniform who represent the civil authority of government and provide for the safety of our citizens. Public Safety is a top priority for our citizens, and Okaloosa County shares this responsibility by providing the financial resources for these services. They have utilized their funding to provide some of the best law enforcement in the Country keeping us safe on the land and water.

Enterprise (aka Business) Funds:

These are important departments within the county that are self-sustaining, and, most importantly, are *not tied to your property taxes*. Okaloosa County's Enterprise Funds provide critical services to the 220,000 residents of our county.

Airports

The airports in Okaloosa have had a hugely successful year exceeding 2,000,000 passengers for the first time in the history of VPS. The number of direct flights has now increased to 48 destinations. The Okaloosa County Airports are debt free and have a \$2.9 Billion-dollar impact annually to our local economy. The growth at VPS has been supported by numerous capital improvements, some recently completed and some currently under way, including expansion of the aircraft apron, baggage claim, parking lots, as well as construction of a new concourse for Allegiant Airlines.

Water and Sewer

The Water and Sewer Department provides potable water and sanitary sewer service to a number of franchise areas throughout the County, exclusive of those served by municipal utilities. Major FY 2024 activities include the design of the new Shoal River Ranch water reclamation facility and clay pipe lining.

Tourist Development Department

In FY 2023, the county began receiving funds for the expanded, countywide Tourist Development Taxing District. This tax is assessed to those who stay overnight in paid accommodations in Okaloosa County. The funds are used for tourism related activities, amenities, environmental improvements, and preservation efforts and distributed to the municipalities based on agreed and approved plan. Recently, these funds were used to acquire additional public use beachfront in Destin. The proposed FY 2024 budget includes requests for funds for Phase II of the Women Veterans Monuments, Artificial Reefs and construction of the public beaches at Tarpon and Crystal Beach.

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

The EMS Division provides Advanced Life Support ambulance services throughout the County and transports patients to medical facilities. In FY 2024 the division intends to replace a large part of its aging ambulances and is currently exploring how to develop a community paramedicine program. EMS is the exception to the rule regarding the enterprise funds. Although EMS is largely self-sufficient through user fees, it does receive around a million dollars per year from the general fund. This general fund contribution helps offset user fees to keep the service affordable for everyone.

CONCLUSION

Overall, it has been a successful and productive year for our County. We continue to have one of the lowest tax rates in the state, but also have many issues facing us as we are no longer a small county. Our population has grown to 220,000 people, and with growth comes new challenges. I believe The Board of County Commissioners is committed to meeting those challenges and taking a common-sense, limited government approach to meet these challenges. With your continued support and feed-back we will only get better.

It is a privilege to serve as your Commissioner in Okaloosa County. As every leader comes to understand, whether in business, military or government, great things can only be accomplished when you have the right people working together as a team. You, the citizens of our great county, have the right people on this team, including the many volunteers who serve on advisory boards, dedicated employees in County Administration, Department Directors, and throughout our various County agencies and departments. I most especially would like to thank the efforts and expertise of my fellow County Commissioners. Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your County Commissioner.

My Sincere Thanks,



Carolyn N. Ketchel
District 2 County Commissioner
Okaloosa County, Board of County Commissioners
1250 N Eglin Pkwy., Suite 100
Shalimar, FL 32579
850-651-7105
cketchel@myokaloosa.com

