



In the first quarter of 2023 Okaloosa County is moving forward and making progress on many fronts!

- **Airport news!** A new airline has come to VPS! *Sun Country* out of Minneapolis, MN began its sold out, non-stop flights into VPS on Wednesday, February 2, 2023. VPS has exclusive service into the Panhandle connecting with international flights out of Minneapolis. This service will mean more jobs, better fares, and more destinations from VPS. Book your flights [here](#).
- **On the Island!** The redesign of Santa Rosa Boulevard is underway. We will see wide paths for biking, running and walking that will provide safety for pedestrians.
- **Brooks Bridge!** Construction has begun on the initial phase, which is underground work for utilities. The cost to the State of Florida is estimated to be \$170 million dollars. The north side (Marler Park side) will be built first, and the old bridge will continue in use until the new side is constructed.
- **Bridge to Bridge!** Working with the Federal government, we are in the final stages of designing the Bridge to Bridge Trail Project. We hope this phase will be completed within the next 3 to 6 months, with construction beginning in the fall of 2023. It's a \$6 million project that will provide a much-needed corridor for walking, running and biking in our beautiful area.
- **In the Gulf!** We are sinking several large vessels to create new artificial reefs. These reefs provide fish habitats, SCUBA dive hot spots, and increased fishing locales. The most recent sinking was the Manta, and you can watch that video on YouTube [here](#). Another sinking is scheduled in the not too distant future. Okaloosa County received a 1.2 Million Dollar Federal NERDA grant for modules that will be deployed over the next 18 months. Also, through collaboration with Eglin, we will be seeing some new even larger projects and ships this year and next. Deployment of these reefs will establish Okaloosa County as a premier national fishing and diving destination.
- **Beach news!** Lots happening in this department:
  - Tarpon Beach in Destin will be our newest public beach access park. We held a "tear down" ceremony at Tarpon Beach in Destin on Feb 3 to remove three houses for our

latest acquisition. Beachfront Parks are being designed and planned to open by May 2024. With construction starting this fall.

- Park Rangers – We have added a new position to our County work crew. Two new Park Rangers will add to public safety, work with beach vending, enforce beach rules and provide a lot of information to visitors and locals alike. Watch our website [here](#) for the job posting.
- Private Vending on County Public Properties – Changes are coming that will balance beach use and revenues for both residents and visitors. There will be a short-term plan for this year and a long-term plan finalize in the next 3-4 month. County staff have been working with many of the current vendors and receiving lots of input to make our beaches better.
- Smoking or Vaping on County Beach/Park Properties – The Commission passed an ordinance banning vaping and smoking on County Beaches and at County parks. New signage with detailed information is forthcoming.
- **In other news!** – Looks like the City of Fort Walton Beach will be selling the fairgrounds to the County. We want to keep it as it is with green space for staging when there is a hurricane in the future. We intend to use Tourist Development dollars to renovate the old buildings on the property keeping the same venue for fish fries, gun shows, antique shows, etc. We are early on in the process, with several steps still to get through, including and updated appraisal of the property, an election and City Manager search, but we are working through those details with a spring 2023 target date.

It is an honor to serve as your 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