

County Connection

February 2025

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Positive momentum

We are well into the new calendar year and your hard work is already reflected in the quality of service that is provided to the Okaloosa County community.

We remain effective in utilizing taxpayer dollars in the most responsible manner that continues to build upon progress of maintaining and improving our infrastructure while sustaining a strong and well-organized team to provide public safety to our residents.

We are continuing to work with community leaders and relevant stakeholders to improve attainable workforce housing to meet the needs of our growing population. Simultaneously we are addressing, with Board leadership, how to responsibly manage growth countywide.

Each department is operating at a high level of excellence that is envied by our neighboring counties. I am proud to work alongside you and look forward to our continued success in serving the public.



John Hofstad
County Administrator

SS United States leaves Philadelphia, begins journey to become artificial reef



The SS United States left Philadelphia Wednesday after nearly 30 years, beginning a two-week journey to Mobile, Ala., where it will be prepared for deployment as an artificial reef off the coast of Destin-Fort Walton Beach. [READ MORE>>>](#)

Okaloosa County approves \$4.6M Veterans Park shoreline restoration project



Empire Builders Group secured approval to construct 16 breakwaters, boardwalks, and salt marsh enhancements at Veterans Park, combining federal grants and local funds for coastal improvements. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa approves \$2.1M for Niceville multi-use path project



The Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners has allocated \$2.1 million in FY25 Surtax Reserves to complete funding for a multi-use path connecting Northwest Florida State College to surrounding residential areas. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa seeks to operate, upgrade Eglin Beach Park into year-round public recreation spot



The Okaloosa County Board of Commissioners moves to partner with Eglin Air Force Base on managing and expanding access to Eglin Beach Park. [READ MORE>>](#)

County Commissioner greets lights more dirt road upgrades



Now about 70 miles of stabilized road remain to be capped. [READ MORE>>](#)

Before & After



Volunteers with Keep Okaloosa Beautiful gathered together recently in partnership with the City of Fort Walton Beach to clean an area off of Lewis Turner Boulevard that had become a dump site from people using the area as a camp. This is another example of how the power or partnerships helps create a better Okaloosa County.



Fixing Fiber

Okaloosa County Information Technology Department recently completed work under the Brooks Bridge on Brooks Street relocating the fiber to make way for new drainage being installed under the road as part of the Brooks Bridge project.

Public safety and snakes?



Okaloosa County Emergency Management, Department of Health Okaloosa-Walton, and Okaloosa Medical Reserve Corps attended a recent community event to participate in community outreach, education, and yes—hold a boa constrictor. They demonstrated pride for Okaloosa County, educated the public for preparedness for various emergencies and disasters, and showed the bravery necessary to face the various Florida surprises, to include the beautiful snakes!

Paving perfection



Okaloosa County Public Works crews are always busy. This asphalt crew was recently making some final touches to Kilcrease Road in Baker during paving operations.

A caring community



Okaloosa County's EMS team was recognized for their remarkable contributions to the Okaloosa County Health Improvement Partnership (OCHIP) and the community at large for their work in helping to create the County's first Post Overdose Support Team, Housing Summit and other notable contributions. Pictured is Crestview Mayor JB Whitten, Okaloosa County EMS Chief Darrel Wellborn, EMS Capt. Greg Cain, Public Safety Director Patrick Maddox and Paramedic Andrew Kindle. Paramedic Kindle was also recognized for his impact with the POST initiative.



Bridge to Bridge Path

Progress Continues on the Bridge-to-Bridge Multi-use path on Okaloosa Island. The approximate 4-mile pedestrian/cycling path, traversing between Brooks and Marler bridges, will also be photoluminescent and will glow in the dark at night. Completion is expected in spring or early summer 2025. No traffic disruptions or lane closures are expected but motorists should use caution in the area.



Hello! My name is Hartley Spaulding and I am honored to introduce myself as the new 4-H Extension Agent for Okaloosa County! I was born and raised in Texarkana, AR and have recently moved to the Sunshine State. Agriculture education has been a passion of mine for many years as I have traveled across the southern states educating youth on post-graduation agriculture opportunities. I am grateful to be serving this community and our youth through extension education. As the 4-H agent, I will create, plan, and implement educational programs that support the goals and values of the 4-H Organization in order to make a positive impact on the growth and development of the youth in our county and shape future generations of leaders.

Okaloosa County 4-H is a great way to get the youth involved with each other and our communities. We offer a variety of clubs to fit the needs and interests of all members. If you are interested in signing up a youth, or volunteering yourself, or just want more information come see us at the extension office in Crestview, FL or contact our office at (850)689-5850 and ask for Hartley! For more information visit <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/okaloosa/4-h/>. Thank you for your support and we hope to see you soon!

The UF/IFAS Extension Northwest District team held an inaugural Farm to Well Summit on February 4, 2025 in Pace, Florida. The Farm Well Summit brought together farmers, partners, and Extension Agents across the panhandle to discuss farmer mental health and resources to support our communities. Okaloosa County Commissioner, Carolyn Ketchel, was the keynote speaker. Commissioner Ketchel shared a memorable address highlighting the importance of mental health in the agricultural and aquaculture communities and how to get help. All Farm Well Summit participants who completed a post-event survey indicated the event increased their awareness of mental health challenges and confidence about addressing mental health issues in farming communities. There were 88% of participants who shared they would use strategies and insights from the Farm Well Summit in their work or personal life.



Recent Milestones



Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and County Commissioners is David Cole who worked 22 years with Airports and is celebrating his retirement. Also pictured is Peggy Tarver, 20 years, Corrections, Jerry Jones 10 years, Facility & Parks, Shelby Serna, 5 years, Beach Safety, Chelsey Sharon 2 years, Administration, Allison Sullivan 2 years, Administration and Thomas (TJ) Birrittier 5 years, Water & Sewer.



OTHER MILESTONES

- Hillary Boyd, 2 years, Facility & Parks
- Simon Ellerd, 5 years, Water & Sewer
- Kenya Shy, 5 years, Water & Sewer
- Darren Alford, 20 years, Water & Sewer
- Vicki Jeter, Water & Sewer

In Case You Missed It

Regular Board Meetings



February 4 - Meeting Notes

- Board approved submitting letter to Eglin offering to help manage Eglin Beach Park.
- Board approved Infrastructure Surtax Advisory Committee Annual Report.
- Board approved using voter-approved infrastructure surtax funding for College Blvd. multi-use path and continued dirt road stabilization work.
- Board approved contract to proceed with Veterans Park shoreline stabilization.

February 18 - Meeting Notes

- Youth Leadership Council (YLC) presented the Shoal River Preserve project to Board.
- Board approved amended Tourist Development plan to reflect collection of the final penny in the expanded bed tax district.
- Board approved accepting FDOT grant for South/Pocahontas Sidewalk.
- Board approved Lloyd Street/Mayflower Avenue Area Stormwater Improvements Project grant funding from FDEP.

TIDBITS

DID YOU KNOW?

According to Florida law, tourism revenue collected from short-term rental lodgings can **ONLY** be used for tourism-related investments. This includes things like public safety, tourism promotion, beach and marine conservation/ecotourism and parks.

Tourism revenue **CANNOT** be used for road and stormwater improvements. Fortunately, our voter-approved infrastructure surtax has helped with those improvements. And guess what? Tourists pay both when they spend money during their visit.

Why is tourism important for Okaloosa County?

Tourism impacts the local economy in many ways; by creating jobs, contributing to sales tax, infrastructure surtax, contributing to small business revenue, and in our countywide tourist development district, they also fund tourism-related amenities, activities, environmental improvements, protection, restoration and preservation.

Local residents play an important part in making tourists feel welcome through advocacy and hospitality. What actions make you more comfortable when traveling? An authentic local recommendation - Tips on the best time of day to travel - Maybe just a smile.

Learn more about Tourist Development at <https://myokaloosa.com/tourist-development/home>

