

County Connection

July 2025

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Stay Engaged. Click the logos to join us on social media



New fiscal year on the horizon

Oct. 1, 2025, begins the new fiscal year (FY2026) for Okaloosa County. Your department heads, administrative staff and Commissioners are actively moving toward a finalized budget that positions the County and its staff to continue providing our residents with superior government services.

We will continue to spend taxpayer revenue responsibly while still achieving the needs of each of your departments, a balance that can be achieved through multiple public budget workshops and strategic thinking.

Your HR/Risk staff, with Board leadership, have worked to ensure employee healthcare costs remain flat in FY26, despite nationwide increases. We will continue to have discussions about improving our workforce and benefits as we move through this budget process.

I am encouraged by the work I see from each of you every day and the progress that represents the values of our County as we meet the growing demands of our community.

Thank you for all you do for Okaloosa County.



John Hofstad
County Administrator

American Airlines announces nonstop Miami flights from Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport



American Airlines will launch daily nonstop flights between Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport and Miami while extending Chicago service year-round. [READ MORE>>](#)

Liberty Tree planted at Crestview History Museum honors late horticulture agent Sheila Dunning



The Daughters of the American Revolution donated a cypress tree to the museum, which was dedicated to Sheila Dunning during a July 12 ceremony. [READ MORE>>](#)

Tiger sharks return like 'clockwork' to Okaloosa Island Pier each summer, researchers find



Scientists have tagged nearly 40 of the predators since 2022, discovering they travel thousands of miles before returning each summer. [READ MORE>>](#)

Northeast Okaloosa County gains Rural Area of Opportunity designation for new job creation



Gov. DeSantis adds northeast Okaloosa County to Northwest Rural Areas of Opportunity through executive order to attract job-creating industries. [READ MORE>>](#)

144-foot former casino boat FANTASEA sunk as artificial reef off Destin-Fort Walton Beach



The 144-foot former casino boat has been deployed in the Gulf, creating a new diving and fishing site for the area. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa County receives more than \$7 million in state funding



Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the state budget, approving funding for infrastructure improvements and mental health programs in Okaloosa County. [READ MORE>>](#)

Afghan-born veteran Naseema returns to Okaloosa for third annual Women Veterans Day ceremony



Naseema, who came to the United States as a teenager to pursue education, enlisted in the Air Force in 1985 and attained the rank of master sergeant. [READ MORE>>](#)

Department News

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Heroes Work Here



The Board of County Commissioners recognized EMT Jessica Freitas with the Humanitarian Efforts Recognized by Okaloosa County (H.E.R.O.) award at the July 1 meeting. Her actions are best represented by a letter from Corp. Joseph Hart of the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office:

On 05/25/2025 at approximately 1330 hours, members of the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office were dispatched to a report of suicidal threats in the Mary Esther community. Deputies were advised that an adult female had attempted to unsuccessfully cut herself with a pair of scissors. Family members were requesting assistance with the patient.

When Deputies arrived, they discovered that the patient had climbed a tree and was standing on a large branch almost fifteen feet up. An unknown object was seen protruding from the patient's left pocket. Based on this information, Okaloosa Emergency Medical Services were asked to respond and stage in the area. After almost twenty minutes of attempting to convince the patient to come down, Deputies were still unsuccessful in de-escalating the situation and bringing the patient safely down from the tree.

Members of Okaloosa EMS, to include EMT Jessica Freitas, responded to the scene. EMT Freitas asked if she could assist, to which she immediately addressed the patient by her first name, indicating she previously had contact with her. In only a few minutes, EMT Freitas established a continued rapport with the patient and was slowly convincing her to come down.

When the patient remained hesitant to come down completely, EMT Freitas literally sprang into action. Without the direction or request of Deputies on scene, EMT Freitas climbed the tree, reaching the same branch where the patient was standing. Aware of the unknown object in the patient's pocket, EMT Freitas retrieved the item, disarming the patient of a screwdriver and tossing it to the ground to Deputies.

EMT Freitas then sat down with the patient and was able to successfully convince and escort her down so that Deputies could initiate a Baker Act due to the patient's clear intent to harm herself.

Her actions demonstrate the strong professional relationship between our agencies and the remarkable efforts that we can achieve when we work together.

EMT Freitas is clearly an asset to the Okaloosa County Emergency Medical Services and her performance speaks volumes about the men and women who make up your team.

Turtle Time



The [Destin-Fort Walton Beach Sea Turtle Patrol](#) recently shared an update on the number of sea turtle nests on our beaches. We are up to 18 nests in Destin - Fort Walton Beach. Bob, Jim, and Beth all found their first nests of the season! They were all laid by loggerhead sea turtles but we are hopeful that we have a green coming soon., We will be getting into the hatching part of the season, so please help us keep our beaches SUPER DARK by shutting off all of your waterfront lights, closing your curtains, and not using a white light on the beach at night. If you have to use a light on the beach, please make sure it is a RED sea turtle-friendly flashlight! You can get one at any of the Destin - Fort Walton Beach Welcome + Adventure Centers!

Blood and Education



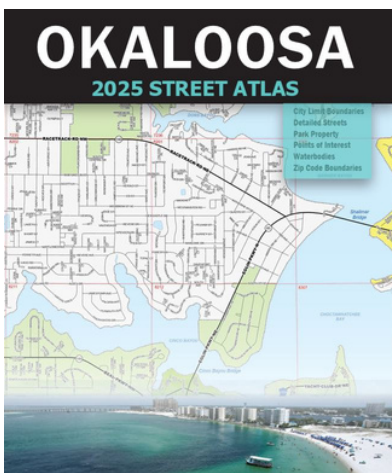
Okaloosa County EMS, MedFlight and OneBlood recently partnered to inform the public and collect as many blood donations as possible during a recent event at the Okaloosa County Administration Building.

Always ready, Making Improvements



Okaloosa County receives calls daily regarding road hazards. One such call came in regarding some bumps in the eastbound lane of John King Rd in Crestview. After some evaluations, it was determined that the best course of action was to perform a mill and resurface of the damaged area and to do so as a night project in order to minimize traffic disruptions. Public Works personnel, working with various sections, were able to quickly coordinate effectively and utilize non-traditional methods, e.g. rent equipment or purchase material from a vendor we don't typically use, to complete this work within the allotted single day timeframe.

Is your phone leading you astray? Download these free maps



Did you know Okaloosa County has a free, downloadable street atlas available in PDF form? Go to https://myokaloosa.com/gis_maps to download these carefully crafted documents from our professional staff in Geographic Information Systems (GIS).



Mosquito Musings

In Florida, we have a lot of deadly animals. You know, really scary things like venomous snakes and alligators and sharks. But the most deadly of them all gets very little attention. That's really because we have well managed control systems in place.

This deadly animal is an insect. It is in the order diptera, which means it is a true fly. It has a piercing mouthpart that it uses on us. So have you guessed what this deadly animal is? It is a mosquito.

Mosquitoes are not deadly because they feed on our blood too heavily. They are deadly because they transmit disease while feeding on us. The number of diseases they transmit is huge. In Florida, we worry about West Nile virus, Eastern Equine Encephalitis, and St. Louis encephalitis. But other diseases sometimes will show up when people travel to other parts of the world like dengue fever, malaria, chikungunya, yellow fever, and rift valley fever.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s here in Florida, we had outbreaks of yellow fever and malaria. In fact, North Florida was known as the malaria belt. What changed you might ask? Well, Florida developed Mosquito control districts in the 1920s. These districts have continued to improve their surveillance and control measures to protect us from these deadly pests.

Interesting facts about these pests. We have over 80 species of mosquitoes here in Florida. Some are just a nuisance while others are vectors of diseases.

- Females are the ones that feed on humans. They need this blood meal for egg production.
- Males eat nectar and sugars.
- There are mosquitoes that feed on other mosquitoes.
- Mosquitoes have 4 life stages - egg, larva, pupa, adult. The adult females are the ones that spread diseases. But larvae are pretty easy to control.

What are things we can all do? Don't allow standing water for mosquitoes to lay eggs in. If you have water standing like ponds or in water troughs, place a larvicide in these areas. This will stop the larval growth in these areas but won't harm any animals consuming the water. Next is to appreciate the mosquito control guys and gals who are busy keeping us safe. They work hard to make sure mosquito populations remain in check to prevent disease transmission.

Thank you [Okaloosa County Mosquito Control](#) for keep us safe from these deadly animals!



Jennifer Bearden

DID YOU KNOW?



52% OF CHILDREN IN OKALOOSA COUNTY WERE NOT READY FOR KINDERGARTEN IN 2023.

But **YOU** can help change that! Join ReadingPals, a statewide early literacy initiative that connects volunteers with local students in VPK and Kindergarten. With just a little time and care, **YOU** can give a child the boost they need to succeed.

TO LEARN MORE CONTACT US AT VOLUNTEER@UNITED-WAY.ORG OR VISIT WWW.UNITED-WAY.ORG/READINGPALS



In 2024-25

170 students in Okaloosa and Walton Counties were matched with a ReadingPal.

And the best part? 89% of volunteers said they felt encouraged by the academic progress their students made.

Want to make a difference, too?
Become a ReadingPal!



Recent Milestones



Congratulations to these County employees who are celebrating their work anniversaries. Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and County Commissioners are Zan Fedorak (30 years Property & Finance Manager for Public Works), Bonnie Tierney (25 years SAN Manager for Information Technology), James Morton (2 years, EMS), Seth Stanley (2 years, EMS).

Other notable milestones

Jonathan Majors



Road Division
Public Works



Barbara Correa



Transit

Not pictured:

- Robert Supinger (Tourist Development, 2 years)



Training Zone

More Okaloosa County leaders have earned their Training Zone Challenge Coins. There are 11 Training Zone classes in the program, but eight core classes focus on policies and procedures. Any foreman, supervisor, manager or director who completes the eight core classes (since 2022) earns the Training Zone Challenge Coin. Pictured l to r: Kyla Orinick, Dana Stephens, Callie Heinemann, Jason Nohrenberg, Lisa Payton, John Mateleska. Not pictured are: Jane Evans, Ryan Prince and Tom Sampson.

In Case You Missed It

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Regular Board Meetings



July 1 - Meeting notes

- Board approved Kristen Shell, AICP for the appointment as the Growth Management Director.
- Board approved the contract with Empire Builders Group, Inc., to construct the Shoal River Industrial Park Entrance Sign.
- Board approved purchase order for deployment of eight shallow water fish aggregating devices (FADs).
- Board approved the adoption of an ordinance granting an Economic Development Ad Valorem Tax Exemption for Monitored Communications LLC, d/b/a TalkingParents.
- Board approved Employee Benefits Package.

TIDBITS



PIER HISTORY >> Headed to Okaloosa Island Pier this weekend? In this episode of FLASHBACK, we explore the history of the pier. Do you know how many piers we have had on Okaloosa Island?

Listen to find out

>><https://www.podbean.com/eas/pb-naub3-18f58e5>

Big Summer Savings for Okaloosa Employees

DID YOU KNOW

As an employee of Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners, you have access to the TicketsatWork Savings Marketplace, the nation's leading program for exclusive corporate perks and discounts!



July 2025 Deals

- **Experience the magic of Disneyland.** Save up to \$64 on multi-day tickets to the Disneyland® Resort—where every visit brings a new kind of happy. With endless things to do, it's the perfect place for summer family fun. Book your summer escape. Enjoy up to 60% off hotel reservations at over 225,000 properties worldwide. Whether it's a weekend getaway or a dream vacation, let your next adventure begin.
- **Cruise into summer.** Receive up to \$1,000 in onboard credit on top cruise lines like Disney Cruise Line, Royal Caribbean, Carnival, Princess, and more. Use your perks for dining, excursions, and onboard experiences.
- **Shop and save with Oakley.** Get 15% off when you shop Oakley sunglasses or apparel online. Includes free shipping—just in time for sunny days. (Excludes NFL and Limited Editions.)
- **Unlock exclusive club benefits.** Save 60% on a new Sam's Club membership and receive a \$20 Travel & Entertainment Credit. Plus, get a bonus household membership and a limited-time free gift!
- **Dine and save with Applebee's.** Get 20% off at Applebee's restaurants nationwide. Whether you're craving a neighborhood favorite or a refreshing drink, enjoy great food in a come-as-you-are environment at over 1,500 locations across the globe. Don't miss the chance to explore these featured discounts!

How to Register:

1. Visit www.ticketsatwork.com
2. Enter your e-mail to register and verify your account with your company code OKALOOSA or company email to create an account.



REMINDER: UPLOAD YOUR DEPENDENT VERIFICATION DOCUMENTS IF YOU ARE ON A FAMILY PLAN. THEY ALL NEED TO BE UPLOADED BY JULY 31ST.

BENEFITS FAIR

Benefits Fairs will be on July 31st at the Crestview Community Center and August 6 at the OCAB.

ALL employees are REQUIRED to log into Bentek to ensure they can access the site prior to Open Enrollment.

Bentek Open Enrollment Portal will be open from July 28 through August 31.

If you have forgotten your password, here is how to recover it.

If you need additional assistance, call Human Resources & Risk Management at (850) 689 - 5871

Bentek Login Information Recovery

Okaloosa County

Username

Password

Log In

Forgot Username/Password?

Don't have an account? Create one

Need help? Contact us:

Visit

www.mybentek.com/myokaloosa

Select **"Forgot Username/Password"**

Okaloosa County

Forgot Username/Password

Social Security Number

Date of Birth

What information did you forget?

-Select One-

Username

Password

bentek

Choose whichever you need information for – Username or Password

Username: Once information is entered it will pop up

Okaloosa County

Reset Password

How would you like to verify your account?

-Select One-

Answer Security Question

Email Verification

Text Verification

bentek

If you forgot Password, the system will ask how you want to verify your account.

You will receive information on how to change your Password.

If you are still having trouble, you can contact Bentek at 888-523-6835 or contact HR & Risk Management at 5871

Current Vendor List (Subject to Change)

July 31 – Crestview

- AFLAC
- Eglin FCU
- Library Coop
- FL Blue
- Medicare Educator
- FL Blue Wellness
- Nationwide
- Corebridge (Valic) ½ day
- Midland National
- Bloodmobile
- AHEC
- 90 Degrees
- Pattison Professional (EAP)
- Safety
- HR
- Gehring Group
- OCHS
- MetLife
- Okaloosa Saves
- United Way

August 6- OCAB

- AFLAC
- Eglin FCU
- Library Coop
- FL Blue
- Medicare Educator
- FL Blue Wellness
- Nationwide
- Corebridge (Valic)
- Midland National
- Bloodmobile
- AHEC
- 90 Degrees
- Pattison Professional (EAP)
- Safety
- HR
- HSA Bank
- EyeMed
- Dragonfly Yoga
- MetLife
- United Way

Sponsors – Donated raffle prizes

- Merle Norman
- Crestview Family Vision
- Joey the Jeweler
- Lou Lou Beans
- Emerald Isle Seafood
- Emerald Coast Zoo
- Helen Back
- Bamboo
- Po Folks
- Sunny Nails
- You Sushi
- Swamp Lion Hydrographics
- Brooklyn Pizza