

County Connection

May 2025

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



An Important Job

The job we have to provide essential government services to the residents of Okaloosa County is significant. Our County is large and requires a diverse set of skills from each department to keep our community functioning smoothly. As you browse through this newsletter, you will see just a small sampling of the work that our departments are doing.

When the sweat hits your brow these upcoming summer months, remember how important your specific job is to the overall team and how much your elected leadership and I appreciate what you do.

Please reach out to me or your department head if you need anything.



John Hofstad
County Administrator

In the News

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Emerald Coast Open removes over 20,500 lionfish during tournament weekend in Destin



The 2025 Emerald Coast Open, billed as the world's largest lionfish tournament, concluded with a total of 13,322 lionfish removed from Gulf waters during the two-day competition held May 16-17 and another 7,180 removed during the pretournament. [READ MORE>>](#)

NWS confirms EF1 tornado hit Destin Saturday with estimated peak winds of 100 mph



The tornado began as a waterspout at Henderson Beach State Park before traveling 1.86 miles north, uprooting trees and damaging commercial areas before entering Choctawhatchee Bay. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa Commissioners support closure of dangerous US 98 intersection in Destin



Okaloosa County joins Destin in supporting FDOT's plan to close the median at US 98 and Regions Way, site of 60 crashes and a recent fatal accident. [READ MORE>>](#)

Three Okaloosa leaders honored for mental health advocacy



Local officials recognized for decades of service improving access to mental health services through collaborative programs and legislative initiatives. [READ MORE>>](#)

60-foot barge, road grader create new artificial reef off Destin-Fort Walton Beach



Marine habitat expansion provides new opportunities for fishing and diving while repurposing decommissioned equipment that would otherwise become scrap. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa Tourism Director outlines potential impacts of proposed tourism tax bill



A bill advancing through the Florida House aims to dramatically change how tourist development taxes are spent, redirecting funds from tourism promotion to property tax relief. [READ MORE>>](#)

'Above and Beyond' (PRIDE Award)

In late summer of 2024, Commissioner Carolyn Ketchel reached out to IT Director Dan Sambenedetto about creating a tool for residents to determine which government agency is responsible for certain roads in the County. GIS Manager Eddie Quinlan was assigned the task and created an app that allows residents the ability to see who maintains their roadways as well as contact information for that entity.

"Mr. Quinlan went above and beyond with many hours of work to create a fully functional and user-friendly app to improve the lives of our citizens, visitors and office staff," said Commissioner Ketchel.



Eddie Quinlan, middle, is presented with the PRIDE Award by Commissioner Carolyn Ketchel, right, and IT Director Dan Sambenedetto.

The functionality of the app has reduced the number of inquiries to County staff.

For his efforts, Quinlan was presented with the Public Recognition Involving Dedicated Employees (PRIDE) Award.



Click to view the new app at <https://bit.ly/WhoManagesMyRoad>

Corrections gives back



Okaloosa County Department of Corrections Jail staff recently hosted an autism polo fundraiser during the month of April. Staff members purchased special logo polos to wear in support of Autism Acceptance Month. They also highlighted several staff family members as spotlight heroes.

Dune restoration



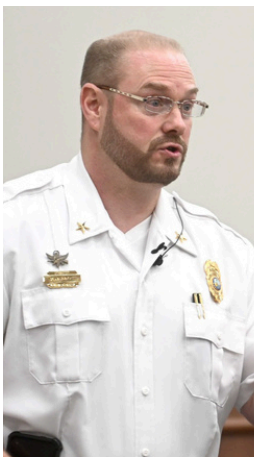
The Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources Team recently partnered with Gulf Coast Fencing and Dune Restoration to plant some dune vegetation at John Beasley Park. About 3,200 plants including several different species, such as morning glory, sea oats, and bluestem were planted. These improvements will help stabilize dunes to withstand weather events in the future.

Keeping Okaloosa Beautiful



Recycling education, cleanups and beautification are just a few of the things Keep Okaloosa Beautiful Director Kali Hiemier and her volunteers have accomplished in recent weeks. For Earth Day, volunteers from Cox Communications cleaned up three dump sites around the County and collected 5,000 pounds of trash. Volunteers from Publix helped plant native species at Kenwood Elementary School and representatives of the Fort Walton Women's Club recently toured WM's new recycling facility. Learn more about Okaloosa County's Keep Okaloosa Beautiful program at KeepOkaloosaBeautiful.com

Florida's Greatest Hurricane Preparedness Party



The threat of rainy weather did not keep people from attending the recent 2nd Annual Hurricane Preparedness Expo at the Okaloosa County Administration Building. More than a dozen vendors filled the halls with vital preparedness information and freebies like flashlights, rain water gauges and the annual hurricane guide.

Hundreds of attendees gathered for the event that included presentations by Okaloosa County Public Safety Director Patrick Maddox and NWS Meteorologist Jason Beaman.



Making progress on fairgrounds property

Progress continues to be made on improvements to the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center (formerly NWF Fairgrounds). Safety improvements and cosmetic changes are transforming the space and have increased usability for vendors.



Water & Sewer and Recycling, Out and About

Elizabeth Massie with Water & Sewer and Jim Reece with Public Works/Recycling distributed important information to the public at a recent Downtown Market event in Fort Walton Beach.



Food Truck Frenzy

For Correctional Officer and Nurses Appreciation Week, Corrections staff invited the public to sample food from various food trucks in the jail parking lot. Officers and Nurses received meals throughout the week, donated by various restaurants and community members to show their appreciation for jail staff.



Youth Leadership project highlights Little Adventures

This beautiful addition to Beasley Park is brought to you by a collaboration between the Okaloosa Youth Leadership Council and Destin-Fort Walton Beach. Pictured is Youth Leadership Council representative, Brynne Massey, a senior at Collegiate High School, giving a presentation to the Board of County Commissioners.

Southwest Crestview Bypass Update



We are about nine months (weather dependent) from the completion of the Southwest Crestview Bypass that will improve traffic flow in and around Crestview. A portion of this project is funded with voter-approved infrastructure surtax. We recently took a tour of the bypass with Deputy County Administrator Jason Autrey and Surtax Advisory Committee Member Hannah Wilburn. [View the video >>](#)

Voter-approved infrastructure surtax info>><https://myokaloosa.com/bcc/infrastructureprojects>



Okaloosa County BCC
SUMMER SAFETY

SOUTH: June 17, 2025 7am-9am
Fairgrounds Conference Room

NORTH: June 25, 2025 7am-9am
BARA Conference Center

Defensive Driving Presentation, Trivia, & More!

For More Information:
Delkins@myokaloosa.com
Or Call: 850 758 2778

THINK SAFETY
Okaloosa County

SPREAD THE WORD - Keep recycling contamination rates low



REMINDER - DO NOT contaminate your recycling bin >>> **NO** loose plastic bags and **NO** bagged recyclables. **Plastic bags can cause serious mechanical failures inside a MRF.** (Materials Recovery Facility). Instead, bring your plastic bags to a store drop-off where they can be properly recycled. Stores include Publix or Walmart. Recycling 101 from WM - <https://www.wm.com/us/en/recycle-right/recycling-101>



Berry Nice!

Here in the panhandle, strawberry season is the sweetest time of the year! Picking is already happening at our local farms, and the crops are sweeter than ever. Why are the berries extra delicious this year?

Some may wonder if the snowfall damaged the plants, leaving a smaller crop and causing a sweeter flavor in the remaining berries. Jennifer Bearden, Okaloosa Ag Agent, says we were lucky here; normally, temperatures in the teens would kill the plants. However, the unusual snowfall we had blanketed and protected the plants with insulation, so we should have plenty of sweet berries.

Bearden says that due to a disease outbreak at the typical supplier's nursery, local farms had to find a new source for plants. The new supplier is distributing a new, sweeter-tasting variety developed by the University of Florida. In fact, Bearden has said they are "some of the best flavor-wise I've ever had."

In addition to being a delicious snack or part of a meal, strawberries are also exceptional in nutritional value. One cup of strawberries contains only about 50 calories and just ½ gram of fat, is low in sugar, and is packed with vitamin C. It also contains fiber, essential minerals like potassium and magnesium to keep your body functioning correctly, and antioxidants that can protect the body from damage that may lead to heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes. According to the Mayo Clinic, Allie Wergin, RD, "Current research suggests that consuming 1 cup of strawberries may help improve heart health by reducing total cholesterol levels and lowering blood pressure, reduce the risk of some cancers, have anti-inflammatory effects, and support cognitive function (source: <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/strawberries-a-nutrient-powerhouse>)."


What are some different ways you can prepare strawberries to include them in your daily diet? Easy!

- Wash the strawberries and snack on them fresh,
- Top low-fat yogurt, pancakes, or low-sugar cereal with sliced strawberries and other toppings,
- Combine with your favorite fruits and low-fat milk or yogurt into a smoothie,
- Chop other fruits and create a fruit kabob or fruit cup,
- Quarter and add to a green salad.

Whether you are looking for a family outing or ready to prep some for the freezer, this year's berries will be a surefire hit! Check out Facebook for the latest updates and events at area farms, including [Brooks Farm Produce & Strawberry Patch](#), [Edmonson Farms](#), [The Strawberry Farm](#), and [Sweet Southern Farms](#).


Have more questions about this topic? Contact Jill Breslawski, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, UF/IFAS Okaloosa County Extension at jbreslawski@ufl.edu



United Way Emerald Coast
WOMEN UNITED  **UNITED WAY**
Emerald Coast

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

Passionate about making a difference for women and girls in our community? So is Women United a community of passionate women dedicated to making a difference. Together, we work to uplift, empower, and ensure that mental health resources and education are accessible to all women and girls in Okaloosa and Walton counties.



UNITED-WAY.ORG/WOMENUNITED | WOMENUNITED@UNITED-WAY.ORG

United Way Emerald Coast
NEXTGEN UNITED  **UNITED WAY**
Emerald Coast

CONNECT GROW LEAD

Ready to grow as a leader, deepen your impact, and connect with a purpose-driven network? NextGen United is your platform for creating meaningful change. Whether you're new to the area or just looking for new connections, we'd love to have you.

UNITED-WAY.ORG/NEXTGEN-UNITED | NEXTGENUNITED@UNITED-WAY.ORG



GIVE BACK & STAY ACTIVE

Join UWEC's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) and make a difference. It's a flexible, rewarding way for those 55+ to use their time and talents to help others.

UNITED-WAY.ORG/RSVP | VOLUNTEER@UNITED-WAY.ORG



 **AmeriCorps Seniors**

Recent Milestones



Congratulations to these County employees who are celebrating their work anniversaries. Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and County Commissioners are Lance Jones who is retiring as a GIS Analyst II with Water & Sewer after 10 years of service and Laurie Welch, Facility and Parks Operations Manager with two years of service.



Other notable milestones

- Sherrie Barrow, Corrections, 2 years
- Stephen Ribolla, Tourist Development, 2 years



Michael Swanson
Corrections, 25 years



Hunter King, Public
Works/Road, 2 years

In Case You Missed It

Regular Board Meetings

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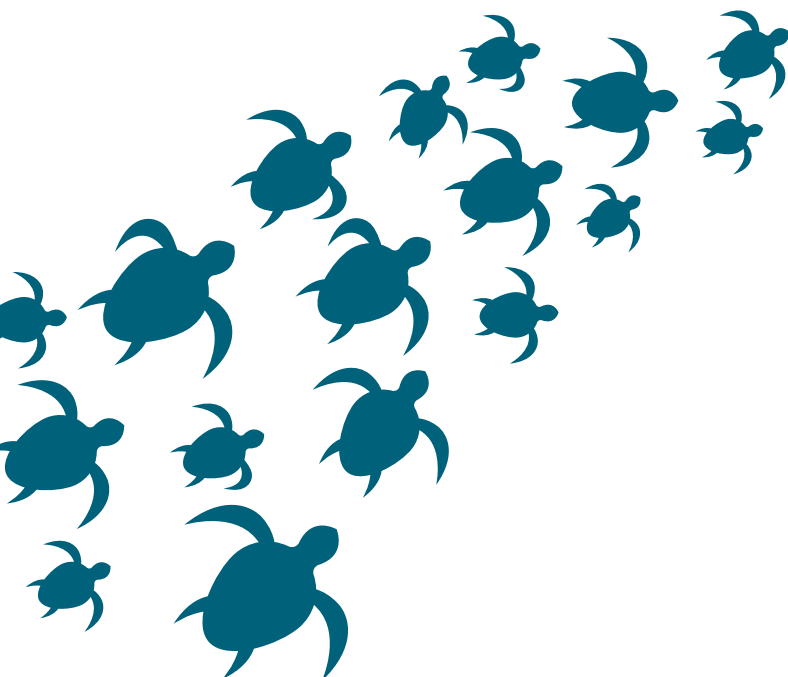
May 6 - Meeting Notes

- Board approved agreement for artificial turf for Shalimar Little League ball park.
- Board approved FDOT grant funding for Laurel Hill sidewalks.
- Board approved rezoning of former School District property in Niceville.
- Board approved accepting the US Treasury \$13,400,000 RESTORE Act Direct Component Award for the Shoal River Ranch Water Reclamation Facility.

May 20 - Meeting Notes

- Board approved Triumph Gulf Coast, Inc, "Term Sheet for Grant Award" for Project Opal for \$16,800,000 in Grant Funding
- Board approved formally allocating the City of Fort Walton Beach's \$1M in the TDT Capital Plan to Liza Jackson Park.
- Board voted to stop funding nonprofits.
- Board voted to increase LHAP allowance from \$50k to \$100K
- Board voted to repeal Crab Island Vessel Exclusion Zone

TIDBITS



Sea turtle nesting season has begun! Do not use white flashlights or your cell phone lights on the beach at night. Instead, pick up one of these handy dandy turtle-friendly lights at the Welcome Center on Okaloosa Island during regular business hours at 1540 Miracle Strip Pkwy SE, Fort Walton Beach, FL 32548.