

County Connection

October 2026

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Getting the Job Done

This newsletter is not long enough for me to fully express my gratitude and pride for our staff and how they handled the recent storm.

Our team expertly prepared and reacted when the storm hit. Despite all of the challenges that arose, the work ethic surrounding the solutions to those challenges was remarkable.

Each individual, whether in the field or at the Emergency Operations Center, took their role seriously and performed as a team through long hours to the benefit and welfare of the residents of Okaloosa County.

Public safety response during a disaster is a prime function of local government, but that does not diminish the personal sacrifice that it takes to make it happen.

I want to thank each person who played a role in getting the job done.

From the people directing traffic at sandbag locations, to the crews clearing roads and the Emergency Management staff who guided us through it all, you have demonstrated why Okaloosa County stands out as an example of what "right" looks like.

As we move through the recovery phase of this event, I would encourage you to remember how we have overcome a challenging period.

Thank you for continuing to perform at such a high level. Please reach out to me or your department head if you need anything.



John Hofstad
County Administrator

Hurricane Isaias



Busy is an understatement. Our Emergency Management team and multiple Okaloosa County staff members from all departments responded before, during and after the storm. Juggling all the components of responding to and preparing for a major storm isn't possible without these amazing team members. They continued their response despite the EOC losing power and a temporary generator outage. Here is a look at the activities at the Emergency Operations Center and around town.



Okaloosa, Town of Cinco Bayou celebrate boat ramp upgrades, new trailer parking with ribbon cutting



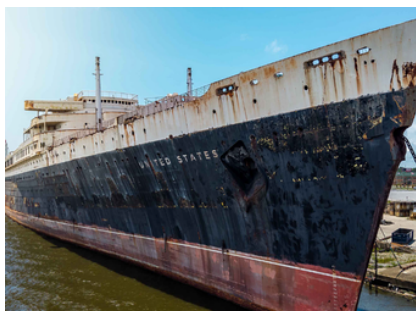
The improvements include 16 new boat trailer parking spaces, each 53 feet long from curb stop to the end of the divider stripe. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa County to bury 28 people who died without family or means at annual Lazarus memorial service Nov. 2



Clergy and members of local faith communities will gather Nov. 2 at Beal Memorial Cemetery to bury 28 people who died without means or family. [READ MORE>>](#)

SS United States set for deployment as world's largest artificial reef second week of November



"This is an exciting move forward to create a one-of-a-kind resource for the environment and for our tourism industry." [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa County paves 180 miles of dirt roads, more than triple its original goal



Okaloosa County has stabilized 180 miles of dirt roads in four years through the voter-approved infrastructure surtax. [READ MORE>>](#)

Multi-Agency Resource Centers open in Fort Walton Beach and Crestview for Hurricane Isaias recovery



The Florida Division of Emergency Management, in collaboration with the Okaloosa County Emergency Operations Center, is opening two Multi-Agency Resource Centers on Wednesday, Oct. 14. [READ MORE>>](#)

DeSantis tells visitors Destin is open for business after Hurricane Isaias



"Don't act like, 'Oh, there was a hurricane that washed ashore. Oh, we're not going to go to Destin now for the rest of the year,'" DeSantis said. "No, no, no, no. You come. You'll enjoy it. People are ready. [READ MORE>>](#)

Infrastructure Insight - From our Public Works Director in the wake of Hurricane Isaias.

When Hurricane Sally struck six years ago, our county faced 70 road repair areas that required work before they were safe for public travel. Fast forward to today in the aftermath of Isaias: only four road areas sustained notable damage.

Pictured is Valley Road, which was repaired today and there is only one area left for repair. This rapid restoration kept our county's road network open and safe far sooner than after past major storms.

A key factor in this dramatic improvement was the stabilization of our county-maintained dirt roads over the intervening years. What began around 2020 as the "50 in 5" initiative grew into a major infrastructure program funded by our voter-approved surtax. By upgrading almost 200 miles of former dirt roads with limerock base and asphalt caps, we eliminated the severe washouts and soft spots that previously made north Okaloosa so vulnerable.

Hardening our infrastructure beforehand drastically reduced post-storm maintenance demands. That allowed Public Works crews to focus on debris clearance and target the few problem spots efficiently—getting the final damaged sections back in service within days rather than requiring the prolonged effort seen after Sally. This outcome would not have been possible without the voter-approved surtax.

-Scott Bitterman | Okaloosa County Public Works Director





Out in the Community

Okaloosa County Water & Sewer was out at the NWF Fair recently engaging with the community. Picture are Jacob Shifflett, Kenya Shy, Elizabeth Massie, and Niki Young.



New Beginnings

Congratulations to this year's Career Online High School (COHS) grads! They officially celebrated on Saturday at the Niceville Community Center, and we couldn't be prouder! Since 2018, the Okaloosa County Public Library Cooperative has helped 77 local adults push past life's hurdles and earn their high school diplomas.



Being Better

Four female inmates at Okaloosa County Corrections have successfully completed the eight-week Circle of Security Class and received certificates of completion!

Instructors Leslie Fuller and Jessica Nelson from The Pearl Project in Niceville led the class, which focuses on strengthening and supporting secure parent-child attachment relationships.



Dorcas Fire Delivers

The Dorcas Fire Department deployed ARGO40 to traverse the treacherous terrain and performed a welfare check, delivering food and water on Fawn Lake Road. We were assisted by Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office and Okaloosa County EMS. We responded to over 30 calls during the recent storm.



Selecting and Planting Trees After a Hurricane

Replacing trees after a hurricane takes careful planning.

Past hurricanes have taught us that large trees planted too close to sidewalks, curbs or buildings are more likely to fall over. These trees often do not have enough room for their roots to grow and support the tree. To avoid this problem, plant large trees farther away from buildings and paved areas.

Tree roots need more soil space than we once thought. Experts recommend that parking lot planting areas be at least 400 square feet to support one medium or large tree, such as a live oak.

Construction can also damage tree roots. Changing the soil level, paving over roots and packing down soil with heavy equipment can weaken trees. Damaged roots make trees less stable and more likely to fall during a storm.

Another common mistake after a hurricane is planting only fast-growing trees. Many fast-growing trees have weak wood and can split, crack or break during storms. They also tend to have shorter lives. For example, a silver maple may live for only 15 to 30 years. A live oak, on the other hand, can live for 200 years or more. Choosing long-lived trees can provide shade and beauty for many years.

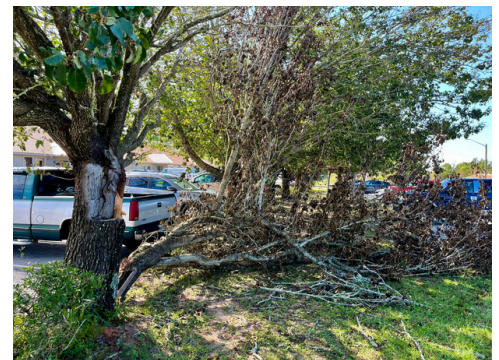
Even trees that stand up well to storms can suffer damage. No tree is stormproof. Trees are adapted to the usual winds in an area, but they may not survive hurricane winds. Some large trees that are known to handle storms well include live oak, sand live oak, bald cypress, pond cypress, black gum and magnolia.

The key to growing healthy trees is to start with a good plan. Buy a healthy tree from a trusted nursery or garden center. Choose a tree that fits the space where it will grow. Follow proper planting steps and do not plant the tree too deep. Finally, care for the tree properly and learn how to prune it to help develop a strong structure.

For more information about choosing, planting and pruning trees, visit the UF/IFAS Extension publication *Wind and Trees: Lessons Learned from Hurricanes*: <https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FR173>



Larry Williams
UF/IFAS Extension Agent



Recent Milestones



Congratulations to these Okaloosa County employees who are celebrating their work anniversaries. Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and Commissioners are Colleen Pardue, GIS Technician (25 years of service), Sheila Fitzgerald, Deputy County Administrator of Support Services (5 years of service), and Norma Montgomery, Purchasing (2 years of service).



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 earns the Training Zone Challenge Coin.

Pictured (l to r): Eric Hendrickson (Facilities), Laurie Welch (Facilities), Rick Rodriguez (Water & Sewer), Jonathan Majors (Public Works) and Mike Eggers (Public Works). Also receiving their coins but not pictured were Brittnee Orr (Housing) and Shane McGuffin (EMS).

Any foreman, supervisor, manager, or director who wants to sign up for courses can login to Training Zone or to find out what classes you are lacking, contact Becca Autry at 850-689-5873.

In Case You Missed It

Regular Board Meetings

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October 6

- Board approved \$578,669 FDOT Award for Navy Street & Bob Sikes Blvd Sidewalk Project
- Board approved contract with company to perform parking lot expansion at John Beasley and Ross Marler parks.
- Board approved contract for site improvements at William International site at Shoal River Industrial Park.
- Board approved agreement to purchase easements for SR85 Crestview Evening Relief Project.

October 20

- Board approved moving forward with County's 2027 Tentative State Legislative Priorities and Funding Requests for Okaloosa County
- Board approved acceptance of \$1.5M Legislative Appropriation as a grant through FDEP for the acquisition of Dowd Park.
- Board approved emergency orders related to Hurricane Isaias, applauded staff for their response during the storm.

TIDBITS



A message from Keep Okaloosa Beautiful

After a storm, our beaches and natural resources can look a little different, and it may take time for them to recover. As we return to the beach we can help care for these spaces by keeping an eye out for litter left behind. Our beach buckets are back on the beach. If you're out for a walk or spending time by the water, borrow a bucket and collect a few pieces of litter if you're able. Every little bit helps protect our coastal environment and keep our beaches beautiful for everyone to enjoy. Please leave natural materials like shells and seaweed in place and avoid handling sharp objects or hazardous storm debris. Together, we can help our beaches and our community bounce back, one small action at a time.