

# County Connection

April 2026

p. 1 of 7



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## Commitment and confidence for the future

As we move through the budget process for Fiscal Year 2027, I am encouraged by the daily commitment I see from staff and Department Heads. We have some potentially challenging budget decisions to make but I am confident in our ability to navigate through the process, balance the budget and maintain the continued level of government services our residents have come to expect.

Our Department Heads and Commissioners are also keenly aware of how this County continues to function at a high level. Our employees are the reason Okaloosa County remains at the forefront of excellence in the state. The proposed budget will reflect that appreciation with all our efforts by minimizing any financial impact to this County's greatest asset: its employees.



**John Hofstad**  
County Administrator

## Okaloosa County disputes school speed camera on Hollywood Blvd. in Fort Walton Beach, asks city to refund fines



Commissioners say at least one camera on Hollywood Boulevard was placed in the county right-of-way without authorization, making citations issued from it invalid under state law. [READ MORE>>](#)

## New sea turtle safety signs installed at 3 boat ramps in Okaloosa County



Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources, partnering with local cities and researchers, installed signs at Marler Park, Liza Jackson and Joe's Bayou urging boaters to slow down for sea turtles. [READ MORE>>](#)

## Okaloosa County to open \$212M Southwest Crestview Bypass on May 1 with ribbon-cutting



The \$212 million bypass project will open to motorists at noon on May 1 following a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new bridge near U.S. Highway 90. [READ MORE>>](#)

## Okaloosa County approves dive safety partnership with Divers Alert Network ahead of SS United States deployment



The globally recognized dive safety organization will contribute \$50,000 over five years to support safety initiatives tied to the world's largest artificial reef project. [READ MORE>>](#)

## County's America 250 parade to be in Crestview next month



Okaloosa County's America 250 Commission Grand Parade and Celebration is scheduled for May 9 in downtown Crestview. [READ MORE>>](#)

## Okaloosa County, Shalimar formalize partnership for new 'Dowd Park' with interlocal agreement



Commissioners unanimously approved an interlocal agreement outlining how the county and town will fund, build and operate the planned waterfront park on Garnier's Bayou. [READ MORE>>](#)

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## Sidewalk safety

We love a new shiny sidewalk, especially when it means a safer community. We were proud to collaborate with the City of Laurel Hill to install this new sidewalk near Laurel Hill School on State Road 85. The City of Laurel Hill won a Safe Routes to School grant last year that allowed the County to help the city get this project off the ground.



## A sign of progress

It's new sign day at the Dorcas Fire District. Captain Jason Laughren (left), new Captain for the Dorcas Fire District and Chief Chuck Cooper display the new sign to be mounted on the front of the fire station on Poverty Creek Road.

## CORRECTIONS



## Giving back

Members of the Okaloosa County Department of Corrections recently celebrated the opening of the new Carter Cafe with our friends at the Emerald Coast Autism Center ribbon-cutting ceremony. The café is student-run through the EAC Transition to Work Program. Corrections staff are wearing blue autism polos as a fundraiser for the center. Leadership from the Corrections team presented a donation check to support the center's training efforts.



## Anchored

Okaloosa County Jail celebrated the recent graduation of three inmates from the "Anchored" program. The faith-based program is designed to reduce recidivism by assisting inmates with past traumas, mental health, and substance use disorders. Each phase of the program consists of 425 hours of curriculum with 1,700 hours of curriculum required to graduate.

## LIBRARY COOPERATIVE

### Training Day



Did you know your local public library is part of a cooperative of professionals trained to provide you with the best customer service in and outside of the library? They recently held their annual education training day where staff from all six libraries gathered to build upon their leadership skills, customer service and brand building.

### Locked up but always open



Always Open! The Okaloosa County Public Library Cooperative in coordination with the Fort Walton Beach Public Library opened a new book locker for library cardholders to pick up and drop off. Service is now available at the Fort Walton Beach Golf Club. View the locations of all book lockers in the County and reserve your book today at <https://readokaloosa.org/alwaysopen>

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### Thanks for Keeping Okaloosa Beautiful



A group from the National Stone Sand & Gravel Association took a break from their Annual Young Leaders Meeting for a little community service, cleaning up litter from Women Veterans Park and Beasley Park on beautiful Okaloosa Island.

### Conservation congratulations



Congratulations to UF IFAS Extension Okaloosa County's Margaret Stewart, middle, who was recently awarded the Conservation Award by the Choctawhatchee Bay Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), for her work in beautifying Women Veterans' Park on Okaloosa Island. Pictured with Stewart is DAR Regent Daquiri Champion, left and County Commissioner and DAR Parliamentarian, Carolyn Ketchel.



**SECURITY ALERT**  
The Golden Rule of Cyber Security

**I.T. WILL NEVER NEED YOUR PASSWORD TO:**

- Fix an issue
- Grant access
- Perform maintenance

Contact [ITSecurity@myokaloosa.com](mailto:ITSecurity@myokaloosa.com) or **850-689-5099** if you are asked for your password.



**UF** IFAS Extension  
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA



## Spring is here, so are snakes. Is it venomous?

Spring is officially here and the forecast shows lots of warm weather. I love the warm weather. Snakes also love it. This time of year, we have a lot of snake identification questions. They are out and about looking for food after the cold winter. Florida is home to 6 venomous snakes and tons of harmless snakes.

It's easier to learn to identify the 6 venomous snakes so you know which ones to avoid. We have mostly pit vipers - eastern diamond back rattlesnake, Florida cottonmouth also called a water moccasin, dusky pigmy rattlesnake, Southern copperhead and timber rattlesnake. The copperhead and timber rattlesnake are found in parts of north Florida. The lone venomous snake that is not a pit viper is the coral snake.

Pit vipers share certain characteristics. They have blocky heads with distinct necks, thick bodies, rough looking skin, and most have dark facial bands (the exception to this is the copperhead).

Coral snakes are brightly colored with black, red, and yellow bands. They have black snouts and red bands touching yellow bands on their bodies. Their tails have black and yellow stripes.

I should add that many harmless snakes try to look like these venomous snakes. They do this so that predators will leave them alone. Many have patterns similar to venomous snakes. Water snakes are a good example of this. They will also flatten their heads when approached to try to fool you into thinking they are cottonmouths.



Never handle a snake if you don't know for sure what it is. Also, never handle a dead snake. They can still envenomate you when they are dead. The safest thing to do when you encounter a snake is to give it space. Venomous snakes will normally move away from danger when given the opportunity.

For more identification tips, there are a couple of good websites that our Extension Herpetologist has created to help people learn to identify venomous snakes in Florida. Please don't bring us live snakes for ID.

**Jennifer Bearden | Agriculture & Natural Resources Agent III**

## Recent Milestones



Congratulations to these County employees who are celebrating their work anniversaries. Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and County Commissioners are Kelli Huckabee (30 Years of Service, Pretrial Services Manager), Daniel Campbell (2 years service, Planner) Brittany Eager (2 years service, Asset Management Coordinator) Emily Rider (2 years service, Administrative Specialist) Casey Norris (2 years service, Master Carpenter) Jay Azzaretto (2 years service, Destination Stewardship Coordinator) Jacob Bolin (2 years service, Land Resources Coordinator) and Joel Lopez (2 years service, Paramedic).



## TRAINING ZONE CHALLENGE



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 left to right: Cindy Harris (Water & Sewer), Michon Jackson (Water & Sewer), Clay Bass (Water & Sewer), Daniel Elkins (Human Resources & Risk Management), Carisse Lejeune (Engineering), and Michael Anderson (Engineering). Not pictured are: Nikki Hatten (Corrections), Nathaniel Hooks (Purchasing), Billy Kervin (Water & Sewer), DeRita Mason (Purchasing) and Robert Witt (Facilities & Parks Maintenance)

# In Case You Missed It

p. 7 of 7

Regular Board Meetings



## April 7

- Board revised County code for towing and fees.
- Board approved moving forward with the purchase of vacant lots next to the Brackin Building.
- Board approved installation of rescue tubes at County beach parks.
- Board approved \$50,000 Memorandum of Understanding with Divers Alert Network in support of dive safety initiatives and the SS UNITED STATES Artificial Reef Project.

## April 21

- Board voted to send representative of Okaloosa and City of Destin to Tallahassee to meet with representatives of the state to discuss future of state-owned Holiday Isle park property.
- Board approved multiple lift station projects and I-10 transmission main project.
- Board approved property exchange with City of Fort Walton Beach.
- Board approved interlocal agreement with the Town of Shalimar related to waterfront property to be used as a park.

# TIDBITS



## FLASHBACK: SVEA - Extraordinary Beautiful Place

Have you looked at maps of Okaloosa County from the 1900s? Some of the towns and cities like Crestview, Mary Esther, Destin are on there, but what about the towns that we never see on current maps, like Fisher, Deerland, Otahite, Newell, Oak Grove, Pineway and even a town called Brick.

Today's episode is about one town near Laurel Hill. It's spelled SVEA. We will get into the founding of this town and of course, how to pronounce it.

Thanks to Ann Spann at the Baker Block Museum for her time in helping to create this episode.

[LISTEN: HERE>>](#)