



Okaloosa County Continues to Prosper Under Conservative Fiscal Leadership and Community Support

As the Chairman of the Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners, I want the citizens to know of the strengths and accomplishments of Okaloosa County after a year facing the challenges of the COVID-19 global pandemic and Hurricane Sally. Our community has met the challenges and come back even stronger. The work of our 900 plus county employees to deliver key services during these challenging times deserves recognition.

Budget

In 2014, when I first became a commissioner, Okaloosa County had a reserve rate of 6.5 million dollars. This fiscal year, we hope to have a reserve of 15 million dollars. This has been an intentional effort by a fiscally conservative Board of County Commissioners. We watched our neighboring County need a tremendous reserve to address the devastation of Hurricane Michael.

This past summer, Okaloosa County was faced with a significant budget deficit due to the economic downturn created when businesses were forced to shutter due to COVID-19. Okaloosa County alone was faced with an estimated \$7 million deficit in our General Fund. Fortunately, close coordination with State and Federal agencies enabled Okaloosa and other local governments across the country to utilize a portion of the Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) money to offset losses incurred in response to the virus.

To begin with some highlights:

Property Values are estimated to see a 6 % increase in FY 2021

Millage Rate has been 3.8308 flat for 4 years

MSTU rate of .2990 has been flat for 7 years

Airports

Thanks to outstanding financial management by our Airports Department, this past year Okaloosa County retired the last remaining long-term debt at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport. This accomplishment is unprecedented in the commercial airport industry and will position our airport for sustained growth and financial success well into the future.

Other Airport Highlights:

Southwest Airlines has joined VPS with flights to Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas and Nashville

We fly to 50 cities direct on American, Allegiant, Delta, United and Southwest.

800 additional parking spaces were constructed to meet the increased demand.

Roads

The single largest project in Okaloosa County history, the Southwest Bypass around Crestview, is well underway. Right-of-way has been secured and construction of the new storm water facilities and the road way is ongoing. This project would not have been possible without the County's half cent surtax, the City of Crestview and the partnerships with the Florida Department of Transportation and Triumph Gulf Coast.

Foy Shaw Parkway linking Hwy 90 and Bob Sikes Airport completion will provide enhanced industrial access which will help encourage further economic development of the Crestview area.

Meigs Drive in Shalimar received a much needed storm water improvement on a primary access roadway to a residential area using surtax and storm water capital improvement dollars.

Economic Development

This past year, Okaloosa County Commissioners approved the acquisition of 588 acres within the Shoal River Ranch property east of Crestview and south of US Hwy 90. The Shoal River Ranch offers unlimited potential for targeted economic development. With proximity access to rail, Interstate 10, US Hwy 90, and Bob Sikes Airport, this property is an ideal location for businesses in the light industrial, manufacturing, and defense support sectors. Work is nearing completion for the expansion of water and sewer lines east of Crestview along US Hwy 90 to Shoal River Ranch.

Human Services Initiatives

Okaloosa has one of three statewide pilot projects that allows for treatment of the non-violent mentally ill instead of expensive incarceration. This is a win-win for everyone, reducing tax rates, recidivism and jail and court costs. There have been 40 participants and 19 graduations. The state of Florida allocated an additional \$350,000 for this Mental Health Pre-trial Diversion Program.

Parks

A highlight of the year has been the development of Veteran's Park on Okaloosa Island behind the Convention Center that will feature monuments honoring women veterans who served in conflicts throughout our country's history. The County established an advisory group of women who served in the military to identify and craft these monuments. Together with shoreline and upland improvements on the pristine 17 acres of coastal dunes, the County plans to complete this project and unveil the Women Monuments on Veterans Day, November 11th for the enjoyment of locals and visitors alike.

Multi Modal Bike Path

Construction of the Bike path from Brooks Bridge to Marler Bridge will begin on the South side of Hwy 98 later this year. Construction costs will be paid with bed tax dollars and a donor gift.

The Lazarus Field program

The Lazarus Program earned Okaloosa County the Florida Association of Counties' prestigious Best Practices Award this past year identifying the program as a model for others to follow throughout the State. Together with members of the local clergy, each November 2 at 10 am, the County hosts a burial service at Beal Memorial cemetery to provide a dignified burial for those in our community largely forgotten and without the financial means to afford a proper burial.

These are just a few of the highlights from the last year for Okaloosa County. We live in a wonderful and caring community that takes care of each other. Looking back on 2020, the challenges we faced, at times, seemed insurmountable. We can take comfort in knowing that our community met these challenges and came through even stronger.