

# Okaloosa County News Release

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## **Okaloosa Information Technology Director Don Vanderhoek Retires, Reviews Accomplishments**

After 26 years Don Vanderhoek, the Okaloosa County Information Technology (IT) Director is retiring. “I am proud of what we have accomplished with technology,” Vanderhoek said. “The Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners (BCC), over the past 25 years, has chosen technology as one of the primary mechanisms for keeping government lean and efficient. Technology has certainly been a very important element utilized to keep the tax rate low.” Okaloosa currently has the lowest millage rate in the State.

The diversity of Constitutional and BCC offices along with the distance between north and south locations has offered unique challenges in performing IT support under the State Constitution. Over the past 25 years, the Okaloosa IT Department, under Vanderhoek’s leadership, created Geographical Information Systems (GIS-mapping), an Applications Division and Systems and Networks Division to meeting the needs of day-to-day operations of the county in one department. However, Vanderhoek’s vision and what his greatest accomplishment, with the support of staff and the BCC is the Fiber Optic Network, that not only saves the county significant money, but also will serve the county well into the future.

“These are the things that have been a priority for the BCC and hats off to them for recognizing the importance of technology, committing funding and staying proactive,” said Don Vanderhoek. “Not to say I haven’t bumped heads with Commissioners and administrators from time to time, but at the end of the day we have always been able to work together – and we made a difference.” In the 26 plus years, Don Vanderhoek has been with the county he has worked with 13 different sets of commissioners and five administrators.

**Vanderhoek shared the important history of the IT Department and what it means today at his Retirement Ceremony on June 23. Technology is such an important part of all our daily lives and a summary of that vital history is detailed below.**

In 1990 Don Vanderhoek was hired as the county’s first Geographic Information Systems Manager. GIS is a collection of hardware and software designed to efficiently capture, store, update and maintain geographic data.

It took about 10 years to complete mapping the county. The county had about 90,000 parcels and after the mapping component was complete we then had to associate the 90,000 property identification numbers with each parcel. The county currently has over 106,000 parcels.

“Once the base map was complete it paved the way for the development for many thematic coverage or layers such as zoning, future land use, addressing, voting districts, emergency response maps and many more. The GIS initiative has continued to be one of the most important technical efforts the BCC has put forth saving tens of thousands of dollars that would have otherwise been spent to contract out for the services. Dan Sambenedetto

now manages GIS and has taken the development to a new level, engineering GIS to meet the needs of county and constitutional offices.”

Around 1998 the county formulated an Information Systems Department and selected Don Vanderhoek as the director. Three divisions were established to meet the technical needs of the departments under the BCC: Systems and Networks, Applications and GIS. “The idea was to have a central department responsible for managing all technology under the BCC,” Don Vanderhoek said. “With this structure we have been able to implement technology as a single department rather than have individuals in each department attempt to learn involved technical duties. Departments can now do the job they were hired to do and are able to leave the technology component to the experts and professionals in the field.”

At about 2003, as a result of the ever-increasing demands for network bandwidth the BCC decided to implement their own fiber optic network. This effort has curbed the cost of communications for county services. “The Systems and Networks Division has really played an integral role in the implementation of the Counties fiber optic network. Donna Lawler leads our Systems and Networks Division and has done an outstanding job in developing and maintaining a very complex system that supports the operations of local government.

Randy Sims the County’s Application Division Manager has implemented our VOIP telephone system, a program that in the long run has saved millions in costs that would have otherwise have been spent to lease communication services.

Since 2003 all 5 constitutional offices have gone onto the fiber system along with all county offices. The implementation of the Fiber Optic system not only meet the needs of today but has also laid a solid foundation for the future. The effort has been shared with Eglin, Hurlburt and the University of West Florida and are working with the School Board staff in an effort that could potentially bring the School Board onto the fiber system. “We are looking to share the benefits of the system that has worked so well for us and will work equally well for the School Board,” added Vanderhoek.

Don Vanderhoek closing remarks: “The job has been an experience of a lifetime. I have been so blessed to have worked with so many great people and to have had the support of the BCC and the IT department. These are the people who have made it all happen and I am so very grateful and proud to have worked with all of them.”

A few employees spoke about Don’s management, saying he treated everyone with respect, was a good friend and mentor, who always provided support and always emphasized within the department to “ask yourself when making decisions, if it is the right one for Okaloosa County.”

Don Vanderhoek was accompanied by his wife and two daughters, and his retirement was well attended by elected officials past and present, vendors, employees and friends. Past Okaloosa County Administrator Chris Holley was in attendance, along with current County Administrator John Hofstad. A couple of elected officials’ comments are below:

Pat Hollarn (*Supervisor of Elections 1989-2009*): “I was on the committee that hired Don, and his career history is the technology of Okaloosa County and its growth. No could have done it better!”

Commissioner Jack Burkett: “Thank you Don for all you have done for our county in your 26 years. You have done a marvelous job in keeping us up to speed in the fast moving world of internet technology.” (*Okaloosa County Commissioner 2001-2004*)

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