

Okaloosa County

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Commission Chairman Nathan Boyles releases statement regarding recent Associated Press Public Records Request

I opened my copy of the Daily News this morning to find a front page article detailing Okaloosa County's failure to timely respond to a "test" public records request. It was a pop-quiz. We failed. The request from a local reporter was sent by email to a catch-all email address for the office of the County Administrator. To be fair, the reporter didn't send the request to one of the half-dozen staff members that she knew would have capably handled the inquiry nor did she send it to any Commissioner. She also didn't follow up to check on the status of her request when the email was not timely responded to. But, pursuant to Florida's public records request law, she didn't have to. Any citizen can request documents from the "custodian" of the requested public record and the record must be timely produced unless subject to a legally recognized privilege. Public records requests don't have to be on any particular form, they don't even have to be in writing and they can be completely anonymous if the requester chooses. The broad nature of the law can make it difficult to ensure that every request is fully and timely responded to. And yet, as I well recall from my days in school, that the test was hard or that I wasn't well prepared, is simply no excuse.

Today, I am at least as frustrated by the fact that I only learned of our failing grade by reading about it in the newspaper. That is not acceptable either. We will do better. We must do better. I don't expect perfection, but I do expect that we learn from our mistakes. I have directed that our entire public records request policy and our media inquiry policies be placed on the next Commission agenda for a thorough discussion. I expect that my frustration will be shared by my fellow commissioners. I will update the citizens of Okaloosa County on the result of that discussion.

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