



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

Okaloosa County continues to lead with conservative fiscal leadership. Blessedly we did not have a hurricane in 2023. Okaloosa residents are seeing the work of the surtax funds thanks to the citizens who voted for the ½ penny tax and the committee that selects the projects, with final approval by the Commission.

Budget

In 2014, when I first became a commissioner, Okaloosa County had a reserve rate of 6.5 million dollars. This fiscal year, we have a reserve of 36 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, and are doing everything in our power to be prepared if such a storm befalls Okaloosa County.

Budgetary highlights:

Property Values are estimated to see a 10%+ increase in FY 2023

Millage Rate has been 3.8308 flat for 7 years

MSTU rate of .2990 has been flat for 10 years

Airports

Thanks to outstanding financial management this past year by our Airports Department, Okaloosa County retired the last remaining long-term debt for all three County owned Airports, at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS), Destin Executive Airport (DTS) and the Bob Sikes Airport (CEW). This accomplishment is unprecedented in the commercial airport industry and will position our system of airports for sustained growth and financial success well into the future. VPS offers direct connections to 50 cities on Allegiant Air, American Airlines, Delta Airlines, Southwest Airlines and Sun Country Airlines.

1200 additional parking spaces were constructed to meet the increased demand, and another 600-space lot is in design now to be completed before next Thanksgiving. A 30,000sf expansion to baggage claim has been designed and will be competitively bid in January, adding two additional

baggage carrousel. Covered walkways are under construction now to cover connecting sidewalks and the entire secondary curb, to be completed by late summer. Visit FlyVPS.com for more information.

Roads

The single largest project in Okaloosa County history, the Southwest Bypass around Crestview, is well underway. This project would not have been possible without the County's half cent surtax, the City of Crestview and partnerships with the Florida Department of Transportation and Triumph Gulf Coast.

We are seeing the work of the surtax thanks to the citizens who voted for the ½ penny sales tax. This includes the Crestview bypass, PJ Adams, Beachview Drive drainage improvements, widening of John King road, Carmel Drive and Beal Parkway intersection improvements, Overbrook area and Lloyd Street area stormwater improvements and many smaller projects for road improvements. We have also had a tremendous effort for dirt road stabilization in the north end. We anticipate we will have sealed 200 miles of previously dirt roads during the next 2 years. An extensive stormwater pipe replacement project on 6th Street and in Lake Lorraine Estates was completed in 2023.

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 for Mental Health Pre-trial Diversion which allows for treatment of the non-violent mentally ill rather than expensive incarceration. This is a win-win for everyone, reducing tax rates, recidivism and jail and court costs. There have been 130 participants and many graduations. The state of Florida allocated an additional \$350,000 in fiscal year 2024 for this remarkable Program.

Parks

A highlight of the year has been the continued development of Veterans' Park on Okaloosa Island behind the Convention Center. This park features monuments honoring women veterans who served in conflicts throughout our country's history. The County established an advisory group of women, each of whom served in the military, to identify and craft these monuments. The County plans to continue this project with shoreline and upland improvements on the pristine 20 1/2 acres of coastal dunes, as well as installation of 4 more statues honoring women for outstanding service which will be unveiled in the Women Monuments at Veterans'

Park. Women Veterans Recognition Day is 12 June 2023 and there will be a ceremony at 8:00 AM at the Convention Center. Please plan to attend.

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, money from our State Legislature and a donor gift. This has been a much-anticipated project.

The Lazarus Field program

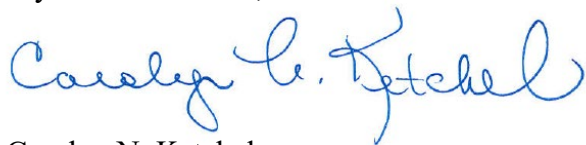
The Lazarus Program is a program to give a dignified burial to those who die without means for a service. Truly these individuals are the most forgotten who walk among us. This year the age range was a newborn baby boy and a 104 year woman who died in a nursing home and had outlived her family. This event was identified 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. Please plan to attend this special service each year on the same date.

Meigs Park for Special Needs

Okaloosa County Commissioners are working with Niceville to bring an upgrade of \$2 Million to Meigs Park which lies along Park Avenue. The project would utilized \$1.25 million in state dollars and \$750,000 in matching funds from Okaloosa County to assist with Special Olympics. It would feature an 8 foot wide quarter mile walking track, a ballfield, basketball and volleyball court, a large Americans with Disabilities Act compliant playground, a large pavilion with a quiet room, new bathrooms and additional parking. Those who participate in Special Olympics will find this idea for training purposes.

It is an honor and privilege to serve as your commissioner. Some of our best ideas come from the citizens to improve our community. Please let me hear from you if you have an idea to enhance our community.

My Sincere Thanks,



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