



MSBUs vs. Unpaved Roads

– **by Public Works Director Danielle Slaterpryce**

The late 1960's and early 1970's brought growth to Okaloosa County. The population was on the rise and communities were being constructed to accommodate our growing numbers. This rapid growth and the construction that accompanied it was wonderful but many local governments were seeing the beginnings of a big problem. In many areas roads were being cleared out of forests or undeveloped areas. These roads were not being constructed to a safe and maintainable standard. Many times the roads were little more than passable trails. The number of these below standard roads began to grow in number. The financial burden of completing, rebuilding, or maintaining these roads became a problem that Okaloosa County knew they could not continue to bear. This situation was also occurring state wide. So Okaloosa County followed the example being set in other counties and adopted a dirt road policy.

In 1983 a list was created of all dirt roads in the County that were being maintained by Okaloosa County. Citizens and developers were asked to bring roads they had constructed that were not on this list up to a minimal standard which included a clay base and adequate right of way so they could be added to the Road Maintenance list. A time limit was set for the completion of the upgrades to these existing dirt roads. Many roads were accepted into County maintenance at this time but some were not because citizens preferred their roads remain rural and the neighborhood environment not be changed. In some areas, roads had been cleared with the intention of continuing construction; however, that development never moved forward so the roads were all but forgotten and were never improved to the standard. All roads not brought up to the road policy standard at this time could not be added into the County Road Maintenance list. Only roads that were constructed to the paved road standard for new subdivisions would be eligible to be added to the list from this point on. Also, policies were written into the Land Development Code that required any new subdivision to construct paved roads to described minimum standards.

Okaloosa County, as well as other counties within the state, thought that the upgrade and acceptance of many of these existing dirt roads would be the solution of the growing problem and for many years it appeared to be. Then the population began to grow at an even more rapid pace. New subdivisions couldn't be built fast enough to accommodate the growing

demand for housing. To make matters worse, land values and cost of construction began to sky rocket. These rising costs forced many people to move to the unincorporated areas in search of affordable land. In some cases, people sold their homes in the incorporated areas and moved to the more rural communities to benefit from the less developed environment. This sounds like a great idea; however, many of the dirt roads that were not accepted into maintenance in 1983 remained little more than frequently traveled trails and the roads which had been cleared in subdivisions where the development was never completed had long been deteriorating. Many homes were built in these rural, unincorporated areas and previously platted subdivisions, and the use of these non-maintained roads increased. With heavier use, the condition of these roads deteriorated more rapidly and became a serious concern. These deteriorating roads need a solution but the funding is not available. Also, the growing population in these rural areas began requesting some of the conveniences of more populated areas. These conveniences include sidewalks, street lights, and other services provided in incorporated areas. Okaloosa County does not provide sidewalks or streetlights so a method to fund and provide these services was needed as well.

Many counties state wide looked to a method for acquiring funding for these services and a possible solution was provided by Florida Statutes. The Statutes state that local governments can create Municipal Service Benefit Units (MSBU). These MSBUs provide a method to collect monies for improvements within a set boundary. These improvements can include sidewalks, street lights, drainage, road construction, road maintenance and other citizen requested services.

The MSBUs are funded by assessments (fees) that are collected from the citizens that will benefit from the improvements. What does this mean for those who pay the assessments?

- MSBUs have a benefit that taxes do not; funds collected from the citizens within the MSBU boundary are only used within that area.
- Funds can be collected by a non ad valorem assessment on a tax bill or by adding a charge on a monthly utility bill.
- Improvements in their neighborhood occur more quickly than if they wait for other funding to become available.
- Decisions regarding the improvements and how the funding will be spent are made solely by property owners within the MSBU boundary. Although the Board of County Commissioners is the final word for MSBU improvements, the Board listens to the input from the MSBU members and makes decisions based on their recommendations.

The MSBU process has worked very well for street lighting in past years so why not use the same concept for roads? In October 2007 the Board of County Commissioners created a MSBU Policies and Procedures for Road Construction, Improvement and Maintenance. The County feels this is a good alternative solution and will assist neighbors throughout the process. Although MSBUs are being used state wide in many other counties for road improvements, it is a new process for Okaloosa County.

An MSBU may be the solution for improvements in an area where citizens work together toward a solution, build positive relationships in their neighborhoods, as well as exercise patience and understanding with each other and the process. All road improvements take time and the MSBU process does not happen overnight. It may take 18 to 24 months to process the initial requests and paperwork then the planning and design required for construction must take place. This can take a few years to accomplish based on the size of the project.

There are over 200 miles of dirt roads in Okaloosa County. This presents a very large problem for the County to solve. The Board of County Commissioners hope that MSBUs become a part of the solution to this problem and results in communities that are more directly involved in the process. If your community is interested in this process please contact Zan Fedorak at 850-689-5772 or zfedorak@co.okaloosa.fl.us.