

County Connection

July 2026

p. 1 of 7



Stay Engaged. Click the logos to join us on social media



Summer Safety and Open Enrollment

The summer heat is upon us and while you may not be working in a position with the County that has you outside all day, it is still important to know the signs and symptoms of heat-related illness. I encourage you to view the symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke and how to treat these conditions [at this website](#).

This is also the time of year when employees can begin planning for open enrollment.

The Board recently approved the benefits package for employees, with a request to increase the County contribution to your HSA accounts.

Open enrollment begins August 3, and ends August 31. All employees are required to log in to app.mybentek.com during this time period to verify coverage and beneficiaries. Benefit Fairs have been scheduled at multiple locations. Those details have been emailed to each employee.

I commend the work you perform daily for this County. Thanks for your continued hard work.



John Hofstad
County Administrator

In the News

p. 2 of 7

Okaloosa County earns \$200,000 state incentive for substance abuse recovery efforts



The county was one of 10 in Florida recognized for its work through the Coordinated Opioid Recovery Network, which has helped cut fatal overdoses 53%. [READ MORE>>](#)

Captains, scientists tag 46 tarpon at second Silver Scale Invitational in Destin-Fort Walton Beach



A group of veteran Destin-Fort Walton Beach charter captains turned two days of fishing into a research baseline for one of the area's most pursued gamefish. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa County to launch in-house animal control in September



Commissioners unanimously approved a scaled-back "animal control light" model that will handle dangerous dogs, cruelty cases and livestock calls but not non-emergency strays or owner surrenders. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa County proposes \$769 million budget for fiscal year 2027 with no millage increase



County Administrator John Hofstad presented a budget plan that holds the millage rate flat for a 10th consecutive year while warning that a November ballot measure could cut property tax revenue by 23%. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa County partners with Panama City Beach on new 224-foot artificial reef



A previously purchased 224-foot vessel will be deployed this fall as the Sposit Reef, with Panama City Beach now covering half the \$450,000 cost. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa takes next step on pay-to-park exploration; free parking for residents to remain



Commissioners approved a procurement committee to continue advancing the proposal. Free parking for county residents remains among the guard rails the board has set if a program is adopted. [READ MORE>>](#)

H.E.R.O. Award



Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners recognized EMS Chief Darrel Welborn with the H.E.R.O. (Humanitarian Efforts Recognized by Okaloosa County) Award. The award honors employees who go above and beyond the scope of their job responsibilities by performing acts that are humanitarian or heroic in nature. Chief Welborn was nominated by Public Safety Director Patrick Maddox. Below is an excerpt from the nomination form:

On Saturday, June 27, while off duty and at home, Chief Welborn received an urgent call from Fort Walton Beach Medical Center regarding a patient, here from Texas on vacation, whose Left Ventricular Assist Device (LVAD) was in jeopardy because a critical power cord could not be located. The equipment failed and the patient's spare cord was back home in the Lone Star State- the LVAD would run for about another hour and change before the device lost power, resulting in cardiac arrest. Without this essential equipment, the patient would die.

Without hesitation, Chief Welborn sprang into action. Using social media, personal contacts and local resources, he tirelessly worked to locate the necessary LVAD cord. He located one in a neighboring County in the hands of a firefighter colleague who recently lost a loved one and had a spare cord to the same device. This wasn't a needle in a haystack; it was a needle in a stack of needles. Chief Welborn personally retrieved the equipment in the neighboring County from the OTHER hero who simply looked at social media at the right time, had the right equipment, and was willing to give.

At the hospital, a conscious, sentient patient was aware and oriented and signing a DNR and watching the clock until the battery runs out on his life, with his wife sobbing beside him. The physicians at Fort Walton Medical Center were able to employ the cord in time to save the life of the patient. I'm told the physicians told the family that the power on the device should have run out 30 minutes ago prior to the arrival of the cord, but for some reason, it continued to function.

It's uncommon to nominate EMS employees for HERO awards because their everyday jobs are to save lives, and they do so with miraculous efficiency, but as you can see, this one was different. This wasn't high-performance CPR, or a flawless intubation, both of which are incredible acts on their own, but that's just "Tuesday" in EMS. That's what they do.

This was a level of resourcefulness and blue-sky relationship maintenance that resulted in the very highest levels of impact to a family who came here to visit. I think they chose the right destination.



BIG of the Year

Okaloosa County Destin-Fort Walton Beach staff member Jessica Valek has been named the 2026 Okaloosa County Big of the Year by Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of Northwest Florida, one of the region's most prestigious youth mentorship honors. This award recognizes a volunteer who has made a lasting, meaningful impact on the life of a young person in Okaloosa County through the BBBS one-to-one mentoring program. Jessica was recognized at the recent County Commission meeting for her service.



A 'Nice' Path

Paving has begun along Forest Road and College Boulevard in Niceville for the new multi-use path. This is one of many voter-approved Infrastructure Surtax projects. Work is ongoing and is expected to be open to the public in the coming months.



A C.O.R.E. Group of Lifesavers

The Florida Department of Children and Families recently announced that Okaloosa County was one of 10 counties to receive a one-time performance incentive of \$200,000 for exceptional efforts in the Coordinated Opioid Recovery (CORE) Network. CORE Network success requires a collaborative effort from healthcare providers, behavioral health organizations, emergency medical services, hospitals, law enforcement, peer specialists, recovery community organizations, and other community stakeholders.



Construction Update

Construction update: Progress continues on the new Shoal River Water Reclamation Facility. The new facility is a major step forward in expanding wastewater treatment capacity for future needs in north Okaloosa County. The \$40.8 million plant has multiple funding sources, including federal and state grants and a generous state legislative appropriation. The new plant is being built on 20 acres of designated property at the Shoal River Industrial Park. The plant is expected to be completed in late 2026.



Certified

The Okaloosa County Department of Corrections congratulates their second group of cadet graduates of 2026. Lynn McKinley, Ashley Barrett, and Nicole Fiore successfully completed and graduated from the Northwest Florida State College Corrections Academy. These ladies have passed the Florida State Exam and are all Certified. Congratulations!

Totally Tarpon



Local anglers and scientists partnered up earlier this month for the Silver Scale Invitational in the waters of Destin-Fort Walton Beach with the help of our Natural Resources Team. The event paired 10 local charter boat captains and 12 researchers to catch, tag, and sample tarpon in Destin-Fort Walton Beach waters. The invitation-only event is built around a single goal, establishing baseline scientific information on a fishery that draws anglers from around the world but remains poorly understood in local waters.



Navigate Summer Safely: Travel Tips

As summer travel season kicks off, it is important to stay alert about your digital security. Keep these quick rules in mind:

- **Delay Social Posts:** Do not post your travel plans or location in real-time on social media. Wait until you get back home to share your updates so scammers cannot use that information against you.
- **Verify Wi-Fi:** Fake networks easily trick you by pretending to be hotel or airport Wi-Fi. Always ask staff for the exact network name. Use your County VPN on work devices, and a personal VPN or cellular hotspot on your own devices.
- **Use Your Own Power:** Avoid plugging straight into USB ports; use your own power brick and plug into a standard wall outlet instead.
- **Block Fake MFA:** Scammers look for people who are out of the office. They will flood your phone with login approvals, hoping you click "allow" by mistake. If you get an unexpected prompt, deny it instantly and alert Information Security.

Thank you for staying alert and committed to our security! ITSecurity@myokaloosa.com

Recent Milestones



Congratulations to these County employees who are celebrating their work anniversaries. Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and County Commissioners are Ronald Beck, 2 years, Facility & Parks, Brittnee Orr, 2 years, Housing, Olivia Richardson, 5 years, Tourist Development and Darrell Foley, 20 years, Tourist Development. Thank you for your service to Okaloosa County.



Congratulations and "Thank You" to Sergeant Diana Cadenhead for 25 years of dedicated service to the Okaloosa County Department of Corrections. Sergeant Cadenhead is our Classification supervisor.

In Case You Missed It

Regular Board Meetings

p. 7 of 7



July 14

- The Board approved an Ad Valorem Tax Exemption to Project Hawk and XP Aerospace Systems, Inc.
- The Board approved raising the special assessment fees for the Dorcas Fire District.
- The Board instructed staff to create a strategic plan for water fire protection in north Okaloosa County.
- The Board accepted due diligence for Dowd Park (Shalimar Park)
- The Board accepted the Employee Benefits package and voted to increase County contribution to HSA.
- Board approved agreement with FDEP for study of Gap Creek flooding issues.
- Board accepted County Administrator's recommendation to deny the procurement challenge by MV Transportation.
- Board voted to move forward with initiative to create new statewide sales tax to replace homesteaded property tax revenue.

TIDBITS

Heat Exhaustion		Heat Stroke
ACT FAST • Move to a cooler area • Loosen clothing • Sip cool water • Seek medical help if symptoms don't improve	 <i>Dizziness</i> <i>Thirst</i> <i>Heavy Sweating</i> <i>Nausea</i> <i>Weakness</i>	ACT FAST CALL 911 • Move person to a cooler area • Loosen clothing and remove extra layers • Cool with water or ice <i>Confusion</i> <i>Dizziness</i> <i>Becomes Unconscious</i>
<i>Heat exhaustion can lead to heat stroke.</i>		<i>Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not given.</i>
	Stay Cool, Stay Hydrated, Stay Informed!	

The symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke can come without you knowing it. Be sure to know the signs of both and what to do.