

# County Connection

January 2026

p. 1 of 10



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



## Major accomplishments on the way

The new year is shaping up to be another busy and productive year.

There are some major projects in our County that will be completed or nearing completion in 2026. These projects include upgrades at Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport, the completion of the Southwest Crestview Bypass, a new water reclamation facility at the Shoal River Industrial Park in Crestview and numerous park improvements.

These improvements will have a lasting impact on the residents of the County and position us to meet the needs that come with a growing County.

We cannot run this County without great leadership and support from the more than 1,100 employees that make up our various departments and divisions. You come to work every day and make success happen.

I am certain we will continue that success this year. Thank you for your hard work.



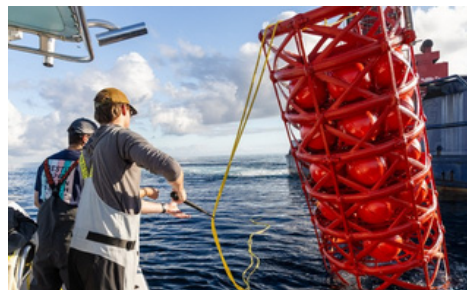
**John Hofstad**  
County Administrator

## Okaloosa Department of Corrections earns third Excelsior accreditation status



The achievement recognizes the agency's compliance with hundreds of standards covering inmate safety, staff training, security and facility operations. [READ MORE>>](#)

## Okaloosa County deploys 8 new shallow water fish aggregating buoys in the Gulf



Eight new fish aggregating device buoys are now positioned about 25 nautical miles from Destin Pass, cutting the distance to consistent pelagic fishing opportunities roughly in half. [READ MORE>>](#)

## County hears from Destin residents, city officials on Holiday Isle park plans



A town hall meeting drew lengthy public comment as Okaloosa County outlined preliminary plans for the state's recently acquired Holiday Isle waterfront property and heard from Destin city officials and residents. [READ MORE>>](#)

## New kitchens, restrooms coming to Northwest Florida Fairgrounds in \$1.9 million project



A new 3,244-square-foot building with catering kitchens, concessions and restrooms will serve the Rigdon Center, funded entirely by bed tax revenue. [READ MORE>>](#)

## Flock cameras draw questions from Okaloosa commissioners, citizens



28 cameras currently operate on 26 county-maintained roadways, permitted through the sheriff's office contract with Flock Safety. [READ MORE>>](#)

## Okaloosa County to celebrate upgrades and reopening of Brigadier General Bud Day Park



Two new pickleball courts, a large pavilion and refreshed basketball court are among the upgrades now available at Brigadier General Bud Day Park in Mary Esther. [READ MORE>>](#)

---



Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners recognized Gabriel Rosenblatt with the H.E.R.O. (Humanitarian Efforts Recognized by Okaloosa County) Award during the recent Board meeting. Below is the award nomination from Convention Center Event Coordinator Lee Holland.



"On Thursday, November 13, the Convention Center hosted the annual event A Night to Honor. The event concluded shortly before 9:00 p.m., and guests were beginning to exit the facility. As I was walking toward the ballroom to locate the client and ensure the evening had met her expectations, I observed a gentleman run out of Ballroom 1, shouting that he needed an AED.

I immediately entered the ballroom, where I was met by the wife of an individual lying on The floor of the northeast corner. She also requested an AED, I turned toward the front entrance to retrieve the device, but I saw that Gabriel had already obtained the AED and was returning to the ballroom. Upon arriving at the scene, he immediately positioned himself beside the guest and began applying the pads to the guest's chest. According to our security footage, less than 45 seconds elapsed between the initial call for an AED and Gabriel's application of the pads—an impressive response time in a situation where every second is critical. Gabriel remained with the guest until EMTs and paramedics arrived. As soon as they took over, he stepped back and provided them the space they needed. Gabriel's professionalism and composure were noted by many who witnessed the incident. I received multiple compliments regarding his swift response, calm demeanor, and overall professionalism throughout the situation. I am personally very grateful to have Gabriel on our Convention Center team; his actions and ability to respond effectively did not go unnoticed.

The guest was coherent and responsive as he was transported from the facility, even making a lighthearted comment or two to the EMTs and paramedics."

---

# Department News

---

p. 4 of 10

## Caring for the Community



Okaloosa County Corrections staff collected gifts this year to give to the Family First Network for their 2025 Operation Santa program. They also assisted Chaplain Shane Hardesty and Good News Global in preparing 750 Christmas care bags for the inmate population.

## SHIP sets Sail



Emerald Coast Association of Realtors hosted Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners Housing Department Director Brittnee Orr, who presented training on the State Housing Initiatives Partnership Program (SHIP) to help bring down payment assistance to low-to-moderate income-eligible homebuyers in our community.

## Welcome to the Team



Congratulations to Okaloosa County Corrections Cadets Mathew Maisonave , Payton Rockwell , Kyson Ivy, and Colten Phillips for successfully completing George Stone Corrections Academy. The Cadets from Okaloosa County held multiple leading roles for graduating class #129. Chief John Moring was the guest speaker for the ceremony.



## Southwest Crestview Bypass Update



The Southwest Crestview Bypass is nearing completion and is expected to be completely open to the public in early 2026. Completion is dependent on paving that requires warmer weather and the installation of utilities for the new K-8 school along the bypass. \*\*\* The bypass is almost completely paved but it is not open to the public. Please do not try to drive on it yet\*\*\* The approximate \$200 million project has multiple funding sources that include the voter-approved infrastructure surtax. Learn more at <https://myokaloosa.com/bcc/infrastructureprojects>

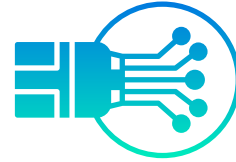
## Here Fishy Fishy!



The power of collaboration and partnerships has once again benefited our environment and, in a couple of years, some very happy anglers. Destin-Fort Walton Beach, in collaboration with the Coastal Conservation Association Florida (CCA), successfully released 25,000 juvenile redfish into Cinco Bayou in December. This multi-year collaborative effort seeks to address the issue of declining redfish populations across Northwest Florida fisheries and enhance the population with stocking initiatives for one of Florida's most popular inshore fish species.



## TECH *Talk*



### Cyber Security

#### Annual Security Awareness Training



January marks Security Awareness Month for Okaloosa County. All staff with network access must complete their assigned cybersecurity training. Check the enrollment email from Ray Ayala to get it done before the month ends.

Go to: [training.knowbe4.com](https://training.knowbe4.com)

2026 ADULT

FIELD DAY

FEBRUARY 20

12:30 PM - 3 PM

United Way Emerald Coast  
NEXTGEN UNITED

LIVEOAK  
FIBER

United Way Emerald Coast  
WOMEN UNITED

Save The Date

BRUNCH & BUBBLY

March 7th





## The Evolution of Okaloosa County's Extension Services

### Foundation of Florida Cooperative Extension Services (1862- 1905)

The Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land Grant Act, granted federal land to states to fund agriculture and mechanical colleges. Signed by President Abraham Lincoln, the Morrill Act laid the groundwork for land-grant universities across the United States. The Florida Agricultural College was established in Lake City in 1884, becoming Florida's first land-grant institution.

The second Morrill Act of 1891 provided federal funds for agriculture and mechanical arts, adding another land-grant institution in Florida, the State Normal and Industrial College for Colored Students.

Under the Buckman Act, in 1905, the Florida Agricultural College and the State Normal and Industrial College for Colored Students became institutions of higher education. The Florida Agriculture College was renamed the University of the State of Florida (in Gainesville) in 1905 and then the University of Florida (UF) in 1909. The State Normal and Industrial College for Colored Students was renamed the Florida Agriculture and Mechanical College for Negroes in 1909 and then the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) in 1953.

### Service to our Communities (1887-1920s)

The Hatch Act of 1887 funded agricultural experiment stations affiliated with land-grant institutions, and by 1888, the Florida Agriculture Experiment Station was established in Lake City. Farmers' Institutes, Florida's first in 1899, provided community-based demonstrations of agricultural techniques. In the early 1900s, there was a rapid expansion of rural community-based educational programming to home demonstrations (e.g., canning), 4-H youth development (e.g., 4-H Corn Clubs for youth in 1909), and horticulture.

### Cooperative Extension (1914-1915)

The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 established the Cooperative Extension System, officially linking land-grant institutions, like UF and FAMU, to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for public education. The Florida Agriculture Extension Division was created in May 1915 and located at UF.

### Okaloosa County Extension Services (1917)

The Smith-Lever Act connected the Cooperative Extension Service with Florida counties. In 1917, Cooperative Extension Services and Okaloosa County began a strong partnership that continues to flourish today. This means Okaloosa County Extension Services reports to Okaloosa County and UF/IFAS Extension Services. There is great benefit in this as their missions and purposes are aligned to serve the Okaloosa County community.

### Our Continued Growth (1964- today)

In 1964, UF's higher education board formed the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS). The College of Agriculture, Experiment Station, School of Forestry, and Cooperative Extension consolidated to UF/IFAS. Today, UF/IFAS Extension is administered jointly by UF and FAMU, collectively uniting federal, state, and county resources to deliver science-based educational programming in agriculture, coastal sciences, family and consumer sciences, horticulture, natural resources, youth development, and more.

### Our Continued Impact (2026- forward)

From its roots in 19th-century land-grant and experiment-station programs to its century-long mission of outreach and education, Florida's Extension Services consistently bridged research and real-world impact. Today, UF/IFAS Okaloosa County Extension Services remains a vital resource to enhance Floridians' lives in Okaloosa County and across Florida through community-centric, science-driven solutions.

# Employee Benefits

p. 8 of 10



Get **immediate biometric results** for cholesterol, diabetes, blood pressure and more! Register for a health screening at **no cost to you.**

Experts will be available during the event to answer your health questions.

## January

## 2026

### Health Fair & Biometrics



Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
5	6	7	8
		County Extension Office 3098 Airport Rd. Crestview 7:00 am – 11:00 am	Water & Sewer 1804 Lewis Turner Blvd Fort Walton Beach 6:30 am – 10:30 am
12	13	14	15
		Corrections Muster Room 4 pm – 7 pm	
19	20	21	22
		Corrections Muster Room 4 pm – 7 pm	OCAB Training Room 1250 Eglin Pkwy Shalimar, FL 32579 7 am – 11 am 12 pm – 1:00 pm (FM only)
26	27	28	29
Public Works – North 1759 S. Ferdon Blvd, Crestview 6:30 am – 10:00 am			

### DO YOU KNOW YOUR NUMBERS?

Receive **\$75** in your paycheck for participating in the biometric screening. With the potential to earn an additional **\$50.**

Receive immediate results for cholesterol, diabetes, blood pressure and more.

Fasting 2 hours before your screening is recommended, but NOT required.

**\*\*\*First-come, first-served.\*\*\***





## Recent Milestones



CPictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and County Commissioners are Robert Halsell, 12 years (Supply Coordinator), Lindsay Larson, 10 years (Airports) and Ernest Griffin, 5 years (Veteran Services).



### Other notable milestones

- Jacob Bryant, 2 years (Facility & Parks)
- James Thompson, 2 years, (Facility & Parks)

# In Case You Missed It

Regular Board Meetings

p. 10 of 10



## January 6

- Board approved the appointment of Michele Shelton, MSc, BSN, RN as the Administrator of the Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County.
- Board approved development agreement for Independence subdivision.
- Board approved submitting grant application for \$1,900,000 for the Wynnehaven Beach Road Stormwater Control and Road Improvements project
- Board approved contract with Joy Gordon Construction in the amount of \$1,505,553 for Rigdon Center concession and restrooms building.
- Board held discussion on the use of Flock cameras.

## January 20

- Board issued proclamation to recognize and take action to celebrate America250!
- Board recognized Gabriel Rosenblatt with H.E.R.O. Award.
- Board held vibrant discussion on the future of the Transit Department.
- Board was presented with Infrastructure Surtax Annual Report.
- Board approved moving forward with \$10 million surtax funding to FDOT for widening State Road 85.
- Board approved allocation of \$2.7 million of surtax funding for new evidence facility for OCSO.

## TIDBITS

### VOTER-APPROVED INFRASTRUCTURE SURTAX

**WHAT  
YOU  
NEED  
TO  
KNOW**



[myokaloosa.com/bcc/infrastructureprojects](https://myokaloosa.com/bcc/infrastructureprojects)

Correcting misinformation starts from within our organization. Please view [this informational video](#) related to the infrastructure surtax that will be placed on the November 2026 ballot for renewal. As you speak with your neighbors and with the public, be sure you are informed about this half-cent surtax. Thanks for all you do.