

# County Connection

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April 2025

p. 1 of 8

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



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## Prepare during blue sky days

This will be a familiar message for many of you. Even though hurricane season comes every year, we must stress the importance of keeping the right mindset as we move into the official Atlantic Hurricane Season beginning June 1.

Major damage can result from even low-category storms or tropical disturbances. Each department has plans in place to prepare for storms and plans for operations if we are impacted.

Your Emergency Management Division of Public Safety in coordination with the Public Information Officer and your Department Heads will channel the flow of information to you in the event of an emergency.

Now is the time to prepare (during blue skies) your home, disaster supply kits and go over plans with your family so that you are prepared. I encourage you to attend the County's Hurricane Preparedness Expo for additional support in your planning. The event will take place on May 3 from 10a.m.-1p.m. at the Okaloosa County Administration Building in Shalimar.

Thank you for your hard work serving Okaloosa County.



**John Hofstad**  
County Administrator

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# In the News

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p. 2 of 8

## **Okaloosa approves \$16.8M Triumph application for aerospace manufacturing project, creating 300+ jobs**



A global aerospace manufacturer plans to invest over \$1 billion and create 336 high-wage jobs at Shoal River Ranch over the next 13 years, pending final approvals. [READ MORE>>](#)

## **New Okaloosa Agriculture Extension Office to be named after Sheila Dunning**



Okaloosa County Commissioners voted to honor the late horticulture expert who served the county for 23 years before her unexpected passing in March. [READ MORE>>](#)

## **New playground debuts at Marler Park on Okaloosa Island**



Okaloosa County officials cut the ribbon Thursday morning on a fully renovated playground at Ross Marler Park, completing a \$1.3 million transformation project funded entirely by tourism tax revenue. [READ MORE>>](#)

## **Jason Autrey appointed to new deputy administrator position in Okaloosa County**



After a decade leading public works and 20 years with the county, Jason Autrey will now oversee three departments in a newly created position aimed at streamlining development processes and enhancing efficiencies throughout the county. [READ MORE>](#)

## **Okaloosa approves purchase of old Red Lobster building in Fort Walton Beach**



County commissioners unanimously backed the \$3.5 million acquisition of the former Red Lobster location adjacent to Liza Jackson Park in Fort Walton Beach. [READ MORE>>](#)

## **Okaloosa commissioners honor Charles "Bull" Rigdon at Destin-Fort Walton Beach fairgrounds**



The resolution, which passed on the consent agenda, recognizes Rigdon's extensive contributions to the county, state and nation throughout his lifetime of public service. [READ MORE>>](#)

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## County buildings named in honor of Dunning and Rigdon

On Tuesday, April 1, 2025, Okaloosa County Commissioners unanimously voted to name two county-owned buildings after individuals who have made immense contributions to the community over the years - Charles Hutton "Bull" Rigdon Jr. and Sheila Dunning.

### RIGDON CENTER

Commissioners approved renaming the fairgrounds as the "Rigdon Center," named for Charles Hutton "Bull" Rigdon Jr, who passed away in December 2014.

### SHEILA DUNNING AGRICULTURE EXTENSION OFFICE

A new 3,000-square-foot facility used by the county's University of Florida Institute of Food and Agriculture Services will now be named in honor of Sheila Dunning, a respected commercial horticulture extension agent who died earlier this year after 23 years of educating and supporting local nursery projects.



## SPREAD THE WORD - Keep recycling contamination rates low



REMINDER - DO NOT contaminate your recycling bin >>> **NO** loose plastic bags and **NO** bagged recyclables. **Plastic bags can cause serious mechanical failures inside a MRF.** (Materials Recovery Facility). Instead, bring your plastic bags to a store drop-off where they can be properly recycled. Stores include Publix or Walmart. Recycling 101 from WM - <https://www.wm.com/us/en/recycle-right/recycling-101>

**Okaloosa County BCC**  
**SUMMER SAFETY**

**SOUTH:** June 17, 2025 7am-9am  
Fairgrounds Conference Room

**NORTH:** June 25, 2025 7am-9am  
BARA Conference Center

Defensive Driving Presentation, Trivia, & More!

For More Information:  
[Delkins@myokaloosa.com](mailto:Delkins@myokaloosa.com)  
Or Call: 850 758 2778

**THINK SAFETY**  
Okaloosa County

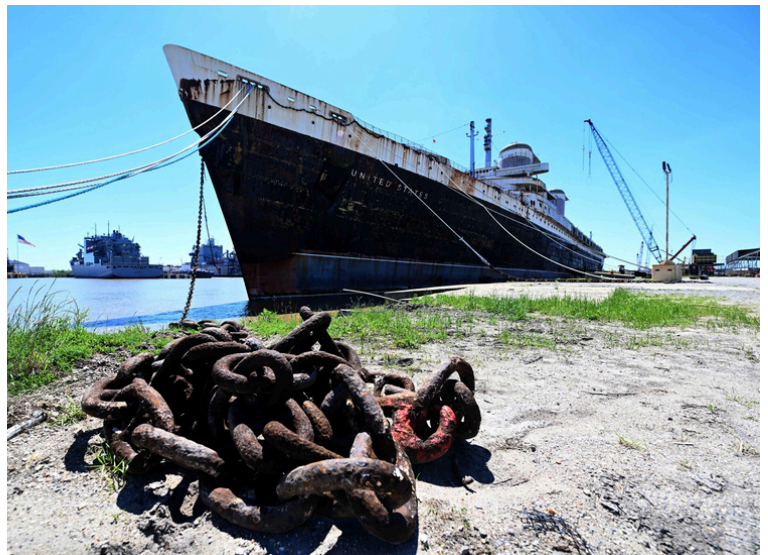
## Cleanup, Cleanup, Everybody Cleanup



Divers gathered recently at the Okaloosa Fishing Pier for the spring cleanup of the pier. Over 80 divers participated and 56.82 pounds of debris was collected. This is the least amount that has ever been collected thanks to regular cleanups over the years. The event was coordinated by the Coastal Resources Team with Destin-Fort Walton Beach and the Okaloosa Fishing Pier, along with multiple community partners.

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## Making progress toward the World's Largest Artificial Reef



County staff and leadership, along with members of the Destin-Fort Walton Beach tourism industry visited the SS United States recently in Mobile, Alabama, for an update on her progress as she is prepared to become the World's Largest Artificial Reef. The ship will provide a substantial boost to the tourism industry as well as create a much-needed habitat for marine life and the surrounding environment, benefitting divers and the fishing industry. Plans to create a land-based museum are in progress. She is currently expected to be deployed in the Gulf in late 2025 or early 2026. Crews will continue the necessary remediation efforts in the coming weeks and months. Learn about her history at <https://www.ssusc.org/>. FAQs on the reefing process at <https://myokaloosa.com/SSUSFAQs>

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## Taking Shape - Bridges and Roads



Okaloosa County Public Works employees are making great progress on the bridge construction at Poplar Head Church Road at Penny Creek in north Okaloosa County. View a 360-degree interactive image on Facebook. [CLICK HERE>>](#)



The Shoal River Ranch Industrial Park is taking shape east of Crestview. The roads and other developing infrastructure will benefit future tenants as well as the state-of-the-art Shoal River Ranch Water Reclamation Facility currently under construction. 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 will be built on 20 acres of designated property at the Shoal River Ranch. The plant is expected to be completed in late 2026.

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## Before adding lime to soil, don't guess, soil test

Applying lime when lime is not needed may have disastrous results in a lawn, landscape or garden.

The pH scale ranges from 0 to 14, with 7 being neutral. Numbers above 7 indicate alkaline soils. Numbers below 7 indicate acidic soils. Some people refer to acid soil as sour and alkaline soil as sweet.

Soil pH is important for plants. It influences the availability of fertilizer and toxic elements in the soil. It affects how well beneficial bacteria breakdown plant residues in soil. It also impacts nutrient leaching.

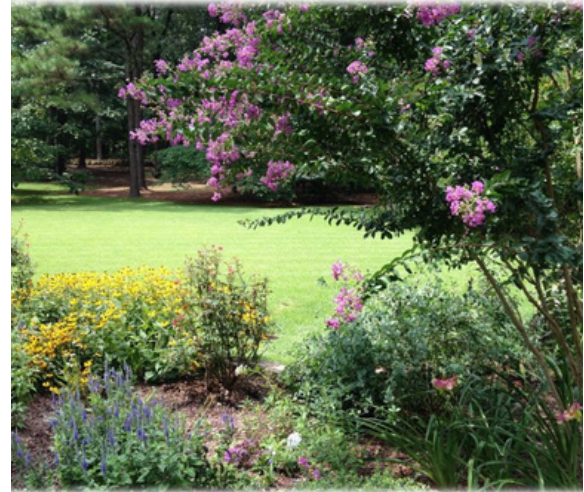
Plants have a range of tolerance to the pH level of soil. Plant nutrients are most available in the pH range of 5.5 to 6.5. However, certain plants need either acid or alkaline soils. Azaleas, blueberries, camellias, centipedegrass, bahiagrass, dogwoods, gardenias, hollies and magnolias need more acidic soils (soils with a pH below 5.5). These plants grow poorly in more alkaline soil because certain essential elements such as iron and copper begin to lock up in an insoluble form and become poorly available when the pH is too alkaline. Applying too much lime can cause this. These "acid-loving" plants, rarely need lime.

There are other plants that prefer a pH above 6 such as ash, butterfly bush, elm, pink hydrangea, sycamore and yucca.

The only way to know if lime is needed is to have your soil pH tested.

The UF/IFAS Extension Office in Okaloosa County can test soil pH free of charge. We also provide more extensive soil testing through our soil testing lab at UF. Contact our office for instructions on soil testing. - Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent

<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/okaloosa/>



Presented by



Volunteer Week

# DAY OF CARING

Thursday, April 24

Join us on Thursday, April 24, for Day of Caring—an annual day of volunteerism. Gather your friends, coworkers, or team and take part in projects that help build a stronger, more connected community.

Sign up for a project today at  
[www.united-way.org/volunteer-week](http://www.united-way.org/volunteer-week) or scan the QR code and be part of something bigger!



**UNITED WAY**  
Emerald Coast



## OTHER WAYS TO GET INVOLVED WITH UWEC:

NWF Young Professionals  
Leadership Conference  
sponsored by UWEC

APRIL 29 | 10 AM - 4 PM  
NICEVILLE COMMUNITY CENTER



NextGen United Social

MAY 7 | TIME TBD  
BLACK RIFLE COFFEE CO



EmpowHER Mental Health Workshop for  
teen girls presented by Eglin Federal  
Credit Union

MAY 10 | 10 AM - 2 PM  
NICEVILLE HIGH SCHOOL



Mental Health Celebration & Walk  
hosted by Bridgeway Center

MAY 16 | 8 AM - 1 PM  
LIZA JACKSON PARK



## Recent Milestones



Congratulations to these County employees who are celebrating their work anniversaries. Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and County Commissioners are Chris Anderson (10 years, Facility and Parks), Joshua Covington (2 years, Airports), Lacie Owens (2 years, Water & Sewer), Elizabeth Massie (2 years, Water & Sewer), Kevin Peck (2 years, Water & Sewer), Ed Vinson (2 years, Public Information).



More leaders have earned their Training Zone Challenge Coins. There are 11 Training Zone classes in the program but eight core classes focus on policies and procedures. Any foreman, supervisor, manager or director who completes the eight core classes (since 2022) earns the Training Zone Challenge Coin.

**Pictured right to left:** Jean Steele, Chris Pelfrey, Tiffany Hull, Brad Callaway, Jarad Chumbley, Karen Thomas, Patty Cook, Brenda Hooks, Tina Moore, Leigh Anne Medina, Jim Kenealy, Randy Woodruff and Ron Downey. Not pictured, but also receiving their coins were: Stephen Blalock, Robert Bowlby, Diana Cadenhead, Matthew Card, Stanley Chopp, Deb Clabaugh, Nick Enders, Justin Harper and Hunter Jones.



# In Case You Missed It

## Regular Board Meetings

p. 8 of 8



### April 1 - Meeting Notes

- Board approved moving forward with refunding County's outstanding 2014 Sales Tax Revenue Bonds and issue new debt for Capital Building Projects.
- Board approved County Administrator's recommendation to hire Jason Autrey as Deputy County Administrator of Development Services.
- Board approved the purchase of property at 326 Miracle Strip Parkway (formerly Red Lobster).
- Board approved moving forward with an audit of County's current financial position.
- Board approved moving forward to submit application to Triumph Gulf Coast for Project Opal application requesting \$16.8 million.

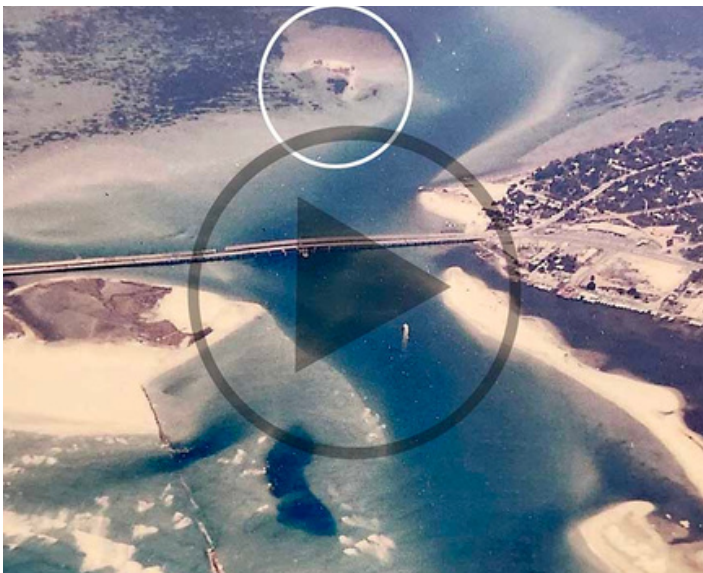
### April 15 - Meeting Notes

- Board approved submitting large-scale plan amendment and rezoning for Air Force Enlisted Village.
- Board continued small-scale plan amendment and rezoning for Ruckel Properties to come back at next meeting with adjustments for better buffer for existing residential area.
- Board approved funding engineering services for a 6-foot sidewalk on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Shalimar.
- Board approved easement documentation with FPL to install permanent power lines at Shoal River Ranch Water Reclamation Facility.

## TIDBITS

### CRAB ISLAND ORIGIN STORY

LISTEN: FLASHBACK (Okaloosa): What do you really know about Crab Island? On this episode of FLASHBACK, we take you on a journey to discover the origins of Crab Island. [LISTEN: >>](#)



### THEN & NOW

Since opening its doors in April 2003, the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center has welcomed meetings and events from across the globe. Now celebrating 22 years of connecting people and creating unforgettable experiences in Destin-Fort Walton Beach!

