



It is reassuring to know that in the face of a pandemic, supply chain interruptions and rising inflation, we in Okaloosa County have had a very positive year.

Okaloosa's economy is healthy with 97,381 people employed in Okaloosa County which is 4,003 more than one year ago. The Unemployment rate is 2.9 %, one of the lowest in Florida's 67 counties. In respect to job creation, the county was given 10 years to create 1300 jobs in the high value defense sector when awarded \$64M for the Triumph Grant for creation of the SR 85 Bypass. The county not only met this requirement a full eight years early but exceeded it by more than 600 jobs.

With heavy input from our friends and neighbors, Okaloosa County is always looking to the future. From creating public beach access ways on Okaloosa Island to a bike and pedestrian pathways from Brooks Bridge to Destin Bridge, we're focused on creating an even better way of life for Okaloosa County.

What's more is Okaloosa County residents don't bear the burden for these projects. Rather, they are paid for by sharp increases in tourism revenue as people from across the country seek freedom that can only be found in northwest Florida.

This is all made possible by the strength of our economy, and the underlying philosophy of promoting freedom over lockdowns, coupled with fiscal restraint, that have resulted in a stable expansion of tourist activity as compared with other parts of the country.

Yet, as tourism increases, so does the local infrastructure requirements needed to ensure we maintain a stable expansion. For example, Okaloosa has seen a dramatic increase in airport usage, where we now have 56 direct domestic flights to destinations on 4 major airlines. Just last year, we flew 2 million passengers through VPS! A new additional terminal is under construction and will be completed this year, and shortly visitors will be able use a new state of the art baggage handling system. 800 parking spaces have been added on our apron. Finally, Okaloosa County completed a Joint Use Lease with Eglin AFB which will allow for flexibility in commercial flights that will not interfere with the military mission.

What's more, under the oversight of a fiscally conservative Okaloosa County Commission, our three airport system in Okaloosa is debt free.

Further the county has successfully completed much needed projects. These include:

- Crestview Southwest Bypass and East-West Connector underway with all phases (Phase V from I-10 north to Hwy 90 kicked off in the Fall and FDOT will start overpass later this year).
- Countywide Emergency Communications System upgrades underway
- A new mass notification system for our area schools
- A new law enforcement Training Complex in Crestview
- Several storm water projects on-going, including Lafitte Crescent – Standish Court Meigs Drive, 6th Street in Shalimar, Bluewater Bay, Overbrook and Lake Lorraine.
- Additional road projects – Commons/Henderson intersection, Hospital/Lewis Turner, PD&E for Northwest Bypass, Hwy 2 widening.
- Replacement for the aging Brooks Bridge in Fort Walton Beach.
- Efforts to improve County roads by stabilizing approximately 10 miles of dirt roads.

We have heard from citizens who wish to have more water access for their boats. With that in mind we expanded our inventory of waterfront access parks and boat launches. Your Board of County Commission approved acquiring properties on Rickey Avenue and Water Street in the south end of the county. Additionally, Crystal Beach property was purchased in cooperation with the City of Destin to give much needed public access in the Destin area.

A beach renourishment pilot project, which has already proven successful for approximately 3 miles of coastal sand is underway with the NuShore project. This promises to reduce the cost of expensive dredging.

In an effort to recognize women who have served our nation since the Revolutionary War to present day conflicts, 8 bronze statues were placed at Veteran's Park on Okaloosa Island. This provides historic preservation, educational opportunities to learn of women's service and preserves the land for the beauty of the wild life including nesting herons, beavers, monarch butterflies and 240 plus costal and migratory birds.

Leadership matters in tough times. We continue to maintain one of the lowest ad valorem tax rates in Florida and are committed to common sense conservative solutions for our community. Okaloosa County is a leader in economic development and continues to make a difference for our citizens.