

## AN OPEN LETTER TO THE RESIDENTS OF ESCAMBIA COUNTY AND FAMILIES OF THE PERDIDO BAY YOUTH SPORTS ASSOCIATION

I am Bob McLaughlin, your new County Administrator. Commissioner Valentino alerted me to a misperception concerning the development of the Sports Complex and I would like to take some time and provide all of you with the latest information on the complex, the new One Stop Building aka new centralized government building, and the fishing bridge. This tale has three parts; the fishing bridge, the sports complex and the new One Stop Building. I apologize in advance for the lengthy narration but you need to understand the details.

### Prologue

If you do not want to read further, the short version is that we have structured a methodology using monies from the One Stop Building, fishing bridge and LOST to continue the design and construction of the sports complex, build a shorter version of the fishing bridge and eventually build the new One Stop Building. We have sequenced the request and approval process to expedite the development (environmental permitting, design and construct) of the sports complex and continue to design and permit of the fishing bridge. We have used the One Stop Building as the alternate project and taken its funding for the bridge and park.

One very important purpose for this approach is to remove the sports complex from the lengthy alternate project approval process so that work can begin on the complex as quickly as possible.

### Chapter 1 - The Fishing Bridge

When Hurricane Ivan destroyed our fishing bridge in September 2004, we (the county and commissioners) could not answer the question of what we wanted to do; replace the fishing bridge in its entirety, reuse the funding for alternate projects, rebuild a shorter version of the bridge and use the remaining funds for alternate projects or not replace the bridge and forget the funding. To safeguard our options we developed three (3) FEMA project worksheets (PW). The first PW addressed removing the bridge debris in the water. The second PW addressed the removal of the standing portions of the bridge and rebuilding a shortened version of the original bridge. The third PW addressed rebuilding the remaining segment of the bridge. The entire fishing bridge is about 7600 feet long and at the time the total dollar amount of the three PWs was about \$12M.

As we were trying to decide if we should replace the bridge there was public and private sentiment that we should replace the old fishing bridge but not to its full length (7600 ft). A shorter version (2000 ft) of the fishing bridge addressed the needs for a small segment of our recreational population and reflected that we were trying to be good stewards of the taxpayer's dollars. Meanwhile we proceeded with the removal and demolition of the entire bridge at the cost of approximately \$2.6M because it was a hazard to navigation.

As we developed a plan to rebuild the fishing bridge with the remaining funds, FEMA decided that it would combine the three original PWs and restrict our funding to the cumulative amount of those PWs. Of course we objected and stated that if FEMA wanted to combine the PWs then we had no objections but they had to use current construction and design costs since we were now almost three years post Hurricane Ivan. FEMA combined the PWs and the new total was \$23,833,227.

Now this tale gets a little more complicated and I will try and provide you with the layman's explanation of how the US Government assists communities to recover from disasters. The guidelines are known as the Stafford Act. This act outlines how the US Government will assist local communities recover. FEMA has codified the act in the Federal Register to cover every conceivable aspect of disaster recovery. The portion that impacted us is the use of the funds for the fishing bridge and how the community can use those funds for other purposes, i.e., alternate projects. Basically stated a community can request alternate projects but if approved would only be eligible for 75% of the original amount. If there are any cost overruns the community would be responsible to pay the difference. In replacing a destroyed or heavily damaged facility FEMA would pay for 100% of the amount to include cost overruns. Also if you replace a facility it must be to its original intent. That means that our bridge was a two lane drive on facility so we had to replace it with a two lane drive on structure. If we wanted to have a pedestrian fishing bridge or pier then that would be an alternate project. Alternate projects have the same approval process as any other PW.

Initially the commissioners directed staff to better utilize the FEMA funding so we developed an alternate project scheme that had two components; a shorter version of the fishing bridge and the development of the sports complex. Looking at the monies available for these two projects gave us enough flexibility to address everyone's concerns. The only problem was time. We had to obtain environmental permit approval before we could submit the alternate PWs and we were estimating about eighteen (18) months based on our past experience with projects of this environmental permitting magnitude. We believed after careful consideration that a better option would be to use the new One Stop Building which is fully funded as an alternate project and release portions of its funding to expedite the permitting and design of the sports complex and bridge. The One Stop Building required no environmental permitting and would only take a few months for approval versus almost two years for permitting approval and eventually PW approval for the original alternate project option of the fishing bridge and sports complex.

We currently have a design build team on contract for the shorter variant of the fishing bridge.

## Chapter 2 – Sports Complex

The initial solution to address the need for a sports complex in the southwest sector of the county was the Bill Dickson Park. The youth sports association and surrounding neighbors objected for numerous reasons and we redesigned the current park to address the needs of the recreational boating community and a smaller park for families. With the election of Commissioner Valentino, the staff again started a new search and the tract of land east of Bauer Road was recently purchased with local option sales tax (LOST) III funds. The nature of the property had several advantages for the county but it also presented us with a challenge on utilizing the uplands. The primary challenge is environmental

permitting approval. The design and construction of the project will cost approximately \$4.5M to \$5.5M. Funding will be a combination of One Stop Building funds and LOST III.

We are in the selection process for a design firm at this time. The selection should take about one month, with the recommendation for the selected firm going to the BCC in April for approval.

### Chapter 3 – One Stop building aka new centralized government building

The county has always had plans to build a truly “one stop” facility for permitting, development review and growth management. We constantly experience community concerns that the existing process is cumbersome and often that anyone requiring these services has to make several stops. The new facility would streamline the entire process because everyone and every aspect would be under one roof, thus its name.

This facility has a completed design and is fully funded. We could start construction at any time. Based on current demands we believed the community would be better served if we could delay the construction of this facility and utilize its funds to expedite two more needed projects.

The current facility has an estimated total cost of approximately \$18M. We have received State of Florida grant funding for a “green” roof and intend to be state showcase facility and be a state wide environmental leader.

### Epilogue

It is very unfortunate that some of you heard a fifteen (15) second sound bite on a journey that has taken over four (4) years. I offer you the services of my office to streamline communications with you and your families on this and any other issues of interest. We are aware that over 1800 youths in your area need youth activities type facilities and we strive every day to exceed your expectations. Always remember that we are first and foremost “Citizens Serving Citizens.”