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FWB Life

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Fort Walton Beach Lands on Expedia's Top 10 Destinations for 2026

By JARED WILLIAMS,
GETTHECOAST.COM

Fort Walton Beach has been named one of Expedia's top 10 destinations for 2026, marking the only Florida location to make the global list as traveler interest in the area surged 45%.

The designation, revealed in Expedia's "Unpack '26" travel trends report, places the Emerald Coast destination alongside nine other locations worldwide, including Big Sky, Montana; Okinawa, Japan; and Sardinia, Italy. Fort Walton Beach is one of only two U.S. destinations on the list.

"It's humbling for us all," said Jennifer Adams, Okaloosa County Tourism Director. "When I took over eight years ago, we didn't have the partnerships that we have now, such as with the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport. I think that if we hadn't ever gotten to that point — where we are all working together — we never would've been recognized like this."



PHOTO COURTESY DESTIN-FORT WALTON BEACH FL

While Adams markets the broader Destin-Fort Walton Beach destination, Expedia's specific recognition of Fort Walton Beach highlights the city's growing appeal to travelers.

The Expedia list, based on

increases in flight and accommodation searches for travel between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31, 2024, compared to the same period in 2025, shows Fort Walton Beach competing with international destinations. Big Sky, Mont., topped

the list with a 92% increase, followed by Okinawa at 71% and Sardinia at 63%.

Adams attributes the growing interest to a strategic shift

EXPEDIA
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The New Year's Evolution:

How Modern Integrative Medicine Is Redefining Wellness

By DR. KAREN DEVORE,
TORTOISE CLINIC

January is a natural invitation to reevaluate how we care for ourselves—not just in terms of resolutions, but in how we want to feel as we move through a new year. More rested. More resilient. More focused. More capable of adapting to life's changes without feeling depleted by them.

WELLNESS
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Magnolia Grill

Equal parts museum and dining establishment, the walls of this 1910 catalog house are covered with pieces of local history

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Trivia Night!

THURSDAYS

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 **Community**
EXPEDIA

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in how the destination markets itself — moving beyond being “just a beach destination in summertime” to offering year-round experiences that give visitors reasons to explore beyond the water.

“Our goal was to, and also our mission is to make time spent here more valuable to all, and I think we’ve done it,” Adams said. “We’ve stayed true to embracing local life, and more and more people are embracing tourism, and we’re offering them more things to do, and recognizing that you just don’t have to sit on the beach for seven days.”

Building Experiences Beyond the Beach

The transformation Adams describes didn’t happen overnight. Under her leadership, the tourism department made a fundamental decision: rather than simply promoting what already existed, they would actively create tourism products that added value for both visitors and residents.

The Natural Resources team, an eight-biologist department led by Natural Resources Chief Alex Fogg, has become central to this strategy. Since 2020, the

team has deployed more than 20 large vessels and thousands of tons of environmentally friendly reef material, creating what Adams calls “a world-class dive destination that serves as essential habitat for species of fish that are important to the ecosystem.”

The artificial reef program has made Destin-Fort Walton Beach the leader in Florida for reef activity. A total of 587 public and 435 private artificial reef sites now exist, ranging from concrete modules to large shipwrecks. These structures provide ideal locations for scuba diving and fishing while supporting marine ecosystems.

“A lot of other destinations don’t see it the way we see it,” Adams said. “We don’t have as many events as other destinations, but we have other opportunities for people to come year-round and learn new skills or be adventurous.”

The department’s sea turtle conservation program, managed by Natural Resources Manager Jessica Valek, patrols the beaches at dawn every day during nesting season to survey for potential nesting and hatch activity. Educational programs like the “C.A.R.E.ing for Turtles” series at the Gulfarium C.A.R.E. Center give visitors and locals alike opportunities to

learn about protecting endangered species.

Perhaps most notably, the destination hosts the Emerald Coast Open, the world’s largest lionfish tournament. Since the inaugural event in 2019, the tournament has resulted in the removal of nearly 85,000 invasive lionfish that threaten native marine life. The program combines conservation with culinary tourism — participants discover that lionfish, despite being destructive to local ecosystems, are surprisingly delicious.

“Look at our Little Adventures program — I don’t know of another destination that is going to pay someone to teach kids how to cast net,” Adams said, illustrating how her department’s approach differs from traditional destination marketing organizations. “That’s my philosophy.”

The cast-netting classes Adams mentioned are just one example of programs designed to get families — particularly children — outdoors and onto the water. The destination developed these offerings after research showed that 56% of children spend less time outdoors than maximum security prison inmates, and 49% of surveyed parents find it hard to play with their kids.

The tourism department’s investments extend throughout

the county. The newly created Land Resources team is developing miles of hiking trails at properties like the 410-acre North Shoal River Preserve in Crestview, which will feature wildlife viewing in mixed upland and wetland ecosystems, primitive camping and event spaces for activities like cross-country racing, archery and orienteering.

Adams said the approach stems from a realization that “we got so big, we forgot to be small.”

“You can come-as-you-are here in Destin-Fort Walton Beach,” she said.

Fort Walton Beach’s Distinct Appeal

Despite the new Brooks Bridge construction currently underway, she believes more visitors are discovering what sets Fort Walton Beach apart as its own destination.

The city offers a different pace and character than its neighboring communities, with access to water activities, museums that tell the area’s military and cultural history, and a downtown food scene that has quietly become a draw in its own right.

“I think that more people are discovering Fort Walton Beach as they search our overall destination,” Adams said. “They’re finding new things. They’re finding Liza Jackson Park, they’re finding Beach Weekend downtown, they’re going down to The Landing. Plus, Fort Walton has a great food scene.”

“The City’s Location Provides Strategic Advantages.

With the Air Force Armament Museum — the only museum in the world dedicated to the collection, preservation and exhibition of artifacts and memorabilia associated with Air Force Armament — Fort Walton Beach attracts military history enthusiasts.

The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island offers restaurants, beach access, live music and movies on the beach. The Okaloosa Island Fishing Pier provides anglers a prime fishing location, while charters and pontoon rentals operate from Fort Walton Beach, giving visitors access to the emerald waters.

Downtown Fort Walton
Continued on page 8



everyday function and long-term vitality. They want to sleep more deeply, recover more efficiently, think more clearly, move through hormonal transitions with confidence, and understand how food, environment,

and genetics influence their health. This reflects a growing recognition that real wellness is less about chasing symptoms and more about supporting the body’s natural ability to regulate and restore.

At the heart of that regulation is communication between the nervous system, hormones, immune function, and metabolism. When these systems communicate clearly, the body adapts with remarkable precision. When that communication becomes disrupted, however,

we start to feel “off,” even if we can’t pinpoint exactly why.

Integrative medicine aims to restore this clarity. It blends foundational practices such as nutrition, acupuncture, herbal medicine, medical massage, and lifestyle therapeutics with modern clinical tools including IV nutrients, hormone support, advanced testing, targeted supplementation, and, when appropriate, peptides. None of these replace conventional medicine;

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WELLNESS

continued from page 1

It’s become quite common for me to see more and more patients shifting from simply treating illness to supporting


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Continued on page 4

When Temperatures Drop, Compassion Rises: How Cold Night Saves Lives in Fort Walton Beach



By SHERRY JONES OLNEY

Winter temperatures have a way of slipping quietly into dangerous territory. While most of the community sleeps—homes warm, blankets pulled close—a life-saving effort is already taking shape in Fort Walton Beach.

Cold does not arrive suddenly. It settles in slowly, numbing fingers, stealing warmth one hour at a time. Turning long nights into something dangerous. For individuals living outside, a single winter evening can mean far more than discomfort. It can mean survival.

That reality is why Cold Night exists.

A Decision That Saves Lives

Before sunrise, Donna Morgan, Director of Homeless Services and Housing at One Hopeful Place, stands inside the Cold Night shelter, surveying rows of neatly prepared bunks. The beds are empty for now—blankets folded, the room quiet—but she knows what they represent. By nightfall, each one could hold someone who would otherwise be facing freezing temperatures with nowhere to go.

Morgan is the person who activates Cold Night on behalf of One Hopeful Place. She monitors weather conditions closely and makes the call when temperatures fall into life-threatening territory. “These are life-safety decisions,” Morgan said. “Cold Night requires experience, constant vigilance, and coordination across multiple partners. When temperatures drop, our focus is immediate and unwavering—making sure



every person who needs shelter has a safe, warm place to go.”

Cold Night is a seasonal emergency shelter operation of One Hopeful Place, activated when overnight temperatures are projected to fall below 40 degrees. When triggered, it opens

48 additional emergency shelter beds, supplementing the 50 beds for men and 17 beds for women already on campus.

Preparing the Shelter

Behind the scenes, the work of Cold Night begins hours earlier. Weather forecasts are monitored as early as 3:00 a.m., and by 9:00 a.m., if Cold Night is confirmed, a coordinated response is set in motion.

Notifications are sent through the Cold Night system and social media. Transportation routes and pickup locations are confirmed. Community partners—including Bridgeway Center—work together to ensure continuity of care and safe transport for those seeking shelter.

By early afternoon, the One Hopeful Place campus begins to change.

Heat is turned on inside the

Cold Night building. Tables are repositioned. Supplies are staged. Every movement is deliberate—because when temperatures drop, details matter.

Arrival and Welcome

As participants begin arriving, they are signed in, assigned a bunk, and offered the opportunity to shower. During this time, One Hopeful Place residents help serve hot coffee—one of the most requested comforts on cold nights. Hands that were numb from the cold slowly begin to warm around paper cups.

Transportation plays a vital role. Buses run from Shell Avenue, with additional assistance from community partners to ensure no one is left behind as daylight fades.

Dignity at the Table

As evening settles in, a line forms for dinner. Men stand quietly, some holding backpacks

Continued on page 5

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 **Community**
WELLNESS
continued from page 2

rather, they deepen and complement it, allowing us to treat both root causes and overall function.

Evolving Tools for a New Year: Peptides, IV Nutrients & Hormone Support

Peptides are one of the most discussed emerging tools in

modern integrative care. These naturally occurring amino acid chains act as subtle messengers, helping regulate inflammation, tissue repair, metabolic and hormonal signaling, and connections between the gut, brain, and immune system. Their goal isn't to override the body but rather to support pathways that have been strained by stress, aging, illness, or environmental demands.

Current research explores

peptides' role in recovery, immune modulation, inflammation balance, gastrointestinal support, and healthy aging. Within my practice, peptides are chosen with careful consideration of each patient's history, medications, lab results, stress patterns, and goals. They are never used as a quick fix, but as a targeted support within a broader, thoughtful plan.

IV nutrient therapy provides



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another route for restoring balance. Delivering hydration, vitamins, and minerals directly into the bloodstream can be especially helpful for correcting deficiencies, supporting energy production, or aiding recovery after illness or exertion.

Hormone replacement therapy, when appropriate and medically supervised, can bring relief and stability during transitions such as perimenopause, andropause, or thyroid dysfunction. Balanced hormones can support cognitive clarity, metabolism, sleep, and overall well-being.

These advanced therapies are most effective not on their own, but when combined with a strong foundation.

The Nervous System: The Center of Regulation

No matter which therapies we use, everything ultimately returns to the nervous system. Stress, disrupted sleep, past trauma, or chronic inflammation can keep the nervous system in a heightened state, affecting mood, hormones, digestion, immunity, and pain perception.

I always begin with a comprehensive evaluation including history, lifestyle, symptoms, and both conventional and specialty lab testing to understand the patterns at play. From there, treatment may include acupuncture or neuro-acupuncture, medical massage, tailored herbal formulations, nutritional

support, or breath and lifestyle practices aimed at restoring regulation.

When the nervous system is supported, peptides, IV nutrients, and hormone therapy gain a clearer path to work. Without that foundation, progress is often slower or less sustainable.

A Thoughtful Approach to the Year Ahead

Optimization is not instantaneous; it unfolds gradually. The smallest physiological shifts such as better sleep, steadier energy, fewer inflammatory flares are often the signs that regulation is returning. They build upon one another, creating resilience in ways that feel both subtle and profound.

For over 30 years, the Tortoise Clinic has brought together Eastern tradition and Western science to support our community's well-being. Our mission remains unchanged to offer thoughtful, individualized care rooted in safety, evidence, and respect for the body's natural intelligence.

As we move into a new year, consider that meaningful transformation doesn't require dramatic reinvention. It begins with understanding your body's needs, supporting its communication pathways, and allowing small shifts to create meaningful change over time because your wellness is a marathon, not a sprint.

COLD NIGHT*continued from page 3*

that contain everything they own. Others wait with empty hands, shoulders hunched—not from shame, but from exhaustion and the cold that has followed them all day.

Before the meal is served, grace is said. For a brief moment, the room grows still. Gratitude is spoken. Dignity is honored. Then dinner is served.

**After Dinner:
Rest and Refuge**

Liz Qualiana, Shelter Coordinator at One Hopeful Place, witnesses these moments night after night. In an interview for this article, she described the immediate shift she sees once guests are inside. "You can see

the relief almost immediately," Qualiana said. "Cold Night isn't just about a bed or a meal. It's about dignity. It's about making sure people feel safe, seen, and respected."

After dinner, guests move into the Cold Night shelter and settle into their bunks. Staff remain on site throughout the night, ensuring safety, supervision, and support. Clean socks, warm bedding, and a secure environment offer something many participants haven't experienced in a long time:

Peace. One participant described it simply: "One Hopeful Place gave me a night of peace. That may not sound like much, but when you've been living outside, it means everything."

The Morning After

Morning arrives gently. Breakfast bags—prepared the night before—are placed at the end of each bed. Juice, fruit, a muffin, and a snack provide nourishment before the day begins again.

Transportation returns participants to Shell Avenue, where staff and volunteers take time to listen, offer encouragement, and connect individuals with additional resources.

When the System Is Tested

Last winter, during a severe cold spell many now refer to as "Snowmageddon," Cold Night was activated for seven consecutive nights.

Roads were impassable. Power outages left homes without heat. Some who arrived were

not chronically homeless—but individuals and families who suddenly had nowhere warm to go.

For staff and volunteers, those seven nights required relentless effort. Beds were cleaned and reset day after day. Meals were prepared and served without pause. Exhaustion set in—but the doors never closed.

Each night, the shelter remained open. Each night, beds were filled.

And each night, everyone who came through the doors was fed, warm, and safe.

The Broader Impact

Cold Night is part of a broader continuum of care at One Hopeful Place. Since 2020, the organization has sheltered 607 individuals, helped 204 people

transition into permanent housing, and ensured 53 veterans found safety and support.

During last winter alone, Cold Night provided 1,111 life-saving overnight stays, while the Well-Being Day Program served 2,897 individuals with meals, showers, and basic necessities.

Compassion That Rises

Yet Cold Night is not powered by systems alone. It is sustained by people—those who show up when the temperature drops and the need is greatest. Their stories—the ones behind the meals, the coffee, the prayers, and the long nights—will be shared next.

Because when winter tightens its grip, compassion does not retreat. It rises.



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A Taste of Mardi Gras: Food, Wine, Craft Beer and More

A Taste of Mardi Gras, this year's Food and Wine Tasting Festival benefiting the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra's youth programs, will feature live jazz, tastings of more than 40 wines, local craft beers, and samples of cuisine from area restaurants. Participating eateries include Aegean Greek Restaurant, Cafe Bienville, Magnolia Grill, Peppers Mexican Cantina, Papa's Smokehouse, Olive Garden, Twisted Grape Wine Bar and several others.

The event is scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 1, 2026, from 1 to 4 p.m. at Raider Central (Building 400) on the campus of Northwest Florida State College in Niceville.

west Florida State College in Niceville. Guests can also browse a silent auction featuring a variety of items, including gift cards, art, pottery, jewelry and themed gift baskets.

Sponsored by the Northwest Florida Symphony Guild, A Taste of Mardi Gras raises funds to support the Symphony's youth initiatives, including the annual John Leatherwood Concerto Competition.



Tickets are \$65 and may be purchased by calling the Mattie Kelly box office at 850-729-6000 or online at MattieKellyArtsCenter.org.

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To be directed to the Mattie Kelly Arts Center events page, scan the QR code below:

SCAN ME!

"Community Convoy" to Support Firefighter David Leonard January 17

Local businesses and community partners will host a "Community Convoy" on Saturday, Jan. 17, 2026, to support Fort Walton Beach Firefighter David Leonard, his newborn daughter, Marlow, and to honor the memory of his wife, Crysta, who passed away last month due to complications from childbirth.

The event begins at 9 a.m. at The Block nightclub, 113 Eglin Parkway SE, with live music, breakfast, and a donation drop-off for the family. At 11 a.m., the convoy will depart, traveling north on Eglin Parkway, west on Hollywood Boulevard past Fort Walton Beach

Fire Station No. 6, then north on Beal Parkway to Emerald Coast Harley-Davidson, 788 Beal Parkway NW.

Festivities will continue there around 11:30 a.m. with live music, free food, and vendors. The event is open to all motor vehicles, and no registration is required.

Sponsors include The Block, Emerald Coast Harley-Davidson, Fast Signs of Fort Walton Beach/Destin, and Motorcycle Riding Events of America, with coordination from the Fort Walton Beach Fire Department. For more information, contact Battalion Chief Matthew Baxley at 850-758-5437.

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Happenings Around FWB

 2026
EVENTS

JANUARY

10

Garnier Beach Garden Club
10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

DeFrance Antiques on Beal's 3rd Anniversary
10 am | DeFrance Antiques on Beal | FWB

GEMS Workshop by Emerald Coast
Science Center
10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Gulf Shore Sunset Painting
3 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

12

Lawyers in Libraries
10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

FWB Snowbird Membership
10 am | FWB Recreation Center | FWB

15

Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's
Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

16

Love You Morning and Night Painting
6:30 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

16-19

30A Songwriter's Festival
Various Times & Locations

17

Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport |
Valparaiso

Simple and Elegant Sewing
10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Palm Turtle Sunset Painting
3 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

18

All Ages: Paint Your Pet
2 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

20

Canasta Club
1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

22

Bourbon, Whiskey & Smoke
5:30 pm | Bud & Alley's | Seaside

22 CONT.

Planetarium Night: The Dark Matter Mystery
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Turtle Heading Home Painting
6:30 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

24

Starry Destin Bridge Painting
6 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

27

Games Club
1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

28

Word Waves Writers
5 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

01/30 - 2/01

Foodees Food and Culture Festival Various
Times | FWB Fairgrounds | FWB

31

Meet Author Joseph Mason
10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Stagecrafters 2025 Showcase Celebration
7 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

2026 Panhandle Travel Show

1-3pm | Trinity United Methodist | FWB

Wacky Tacky Ball

6 pm | Emerald Grande | Destin

FEBRUARY

03

FWB Snowbird Membership
10 am | FWB Recreation Center | FWB

05

Coffee with the City Manager
8 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Emerald Coast Music Alliance

Free Community Concert
6 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

06

FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB

Page Turners Book Club

10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

07

Discover Science Saturday
10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

07 CONT.

A Midsummer Night's Dream Soirée
4:30 pm | 17 Industrial St NW | FWB

Classical Connections featuring Howard Levy
7:30 pm | Destin High School | Destin

ONGOING EVENTS

VFW Post 7674 - Sunday Breakfasts
8 - 11:30 am | Sun | 231 Carol Ave | FWB

SINGO Music Bingo Nights
6 pm | Tues | The Island Resort | FWB

Live Trivia Nights
6:30 pm | Thurs | AJ's on the Bayou | FWB

Karaoke Night
7 pm | Thurs | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB

FARMERS MARKETS

Okaloosa County Farmer's Market
Saturdays | 7 am - 2 pm
1954 Lewis Turner Blvd | FWB

Downtown FWB Farmer's Market
2nd & 4th Saturdays | 8 am - 1 pm
FWB Landing Park | FWB

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EXPEDIA*continued from page 6*

Beach features unique shops and dining that provide alternatives when beach conditions aren't ideal or families need a break from the sand.

"I think once you start to embrace Fort Walton Beach and all that the city has to offer, it's appealing," Adams said.

Changing Perceptions from Within

While many destinations focus marketing dollars exclusively on attracting visitors, Adams took an unconventional approach that drew questions from her peers: she invested in marketing to locals.

"Seven years ago, our hospitality scores were not good," Adams said. "Our visitors thought that we didn't have any southern hospitality, and we've all really worked on that."

The internal marketing strategy required redefining what tourism promotion means. Working with the county clerk, internal departments and the county attorney, Adams' team was able to define tourism and promotion to include efforts within the local market — not just exterior markets. "Anybody can do an ad campaign and buy media — that's not what it's all about," Adams said. "You have to live up to that."

The strategy paid off. Improved hospitality scores reflect a shift in how locals view tourism, recognizing the economic benefits it provides to the community. The tourism department collected \$42.9 million in tourist development tax, which translated to \$736 million in total visitor spending and tax impact — money flowing to local shops, restaurants, charters and

bers every month, but I also look at visitor spend," Adams said. "That's extremely important so that I can know that I'm bringing the right person here."

The tourism department also expanded its tax district in recent years, adding mostly hotels that increased inventory available through booking platforms like Expedia. The destination now has nearly 17,000 units, up from just under 14,000 when Adams' predecessor began.

The expansion came with challenges. Adding more hotels could have diluted average daily rates and occupancy by offering more options. But Adams saw opportunity, particularly in the north end of the county, where hotels sometimes perform better than southern properties in winter months due to business and military travel.

To maintain visibility across all seasons and accommodate the expanded inventory, the tourism department shifted to an "always on" strategy with Google, ensuring the destination appears in searches regardless of season. "There's not one person that doesn't use Google in a day," Adams said. "And now with AI, we're trying to work that into our measurement system."

The multi-pronged approach — creating distinctive tourism products, improving local attitudes toward visitors, expanding accommodation options and maintaining consistent digital presence — has positioned the destination for year-round visitation rather than seasonal peaks.

Looking ahead

The tourism department has invested approximately \$16 million in the expanded district



PHOTO CREDIT ALEX FOGG



over the past few years and continues to develop the north end with an ecotourism focus.

Adams also has her sights set on achieving Expedia's new Smart Travel Health Check designation, a framework that evaluates destinations on sus-

The destination already holds Destinations International accreditation with distinction, which required a rigorous year-long process evaluating sustainability, workplace environment, partnerships and communication. "When I saw that Smart Check, I told my team that we are going to go through the same process that we did and we received our Accreditation with Distinction," Adams said. "I want that check."

Adams credits the Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners for supporting the tourism department's vision and investments. "I am so blessed to have a group of commissioners that support us tremendously," she said. "They all have a vision and it's nice that they're uniting that vision."

The Commissioners' county-wide approach has enabled cross-district support for projects like purchasing the SS United States for deployment as an artificial reef and buying hundreds of acres in the north end for tourism development.

For Adams, the Expedia recognition validates a philosophy of staying small while doing big things. "When I got here, the destination got so big that we forgot how to be small. It's okay to be small," Adams said. "You can be a small destination and have the value of these other big ones."

She added: "We had to go back to being that village that we once were. I think that people, including our locals, like having a pace where they can discover and rediscover themselves in any part of our county over and over again. And I think that's really neat about Destin-Fort Walton Beach."

There's a lot to **LOVE** about Fort Walton Beach!

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The 17th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival Brings Top-Notch Talent, Music Lovers from Around the Globe

BY WILL ESTELL

If you consider yourself a fan of great music and the talented songwriters who make the music you love come to life, you definitely want to make plans to attend the 17th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival. Ranked as one of the top three songwriter festivals in the entire country, there are plenty of reasons to make this your first musical event of the new year: over 125 reasons in fact—and that's just the number of artists playing it!

The renowned festival of music and fun celebrates its 17th year, January 16 - 19, 2026, with four days of performances, including two days of headliners on presenting sponsor Grand Boulevard's main stage in beautiful Miramar Beach. The winter weekend of music and fun is celebrated by music lovers around the globe and somehow seems to get better every single year. That's something I can attest to, as I attended the very first one! With performances at more than 30 venues, spanning over 30 miles of South Walton's beach communities, this year's festival offers something for everyone. Whether you're a fan of Americana, rock, folk, country or jazz, the popular festival brings some of the best songwriters to ever grace any stage: all converging on our beautiful, NWFL beaches.

This year's lineup is another assortment of phenomenal artists, from Saturday's Grand Boulevard main stage headliners Paul McDonald & The Mourning Doves, I'm With Her, and 10,000 Maniacs to Sunday's headliners, Nikki Lane, Toad The Wet Sprocket, and the iconic Mavis Staples. Additionally, 2026's lineup includes such well known lyrical masters as Abe Partridge, Charlie Starr of Blackberry Smoke, Benji Shanks, Shawn Mullins, Jeffrey Steele, Paul Thorn, David Ryan Harris, Murray Attaway, Dan Navarro, Brian White, Charlie Mars, Jesse Lynn Madera, and a plethora of both first timers and returning 30A SWF favorites.

When I asked multi-hitmaker and award-winning songwriter Jeffrey Steele what keeps him coming back to perform year-after-year, he said, "I always look



forward to 30A Songwriter's Festival, not only as another opportunity to do what I love: singing and entertaining, but also seeing the fans and many of my writer friends I don't see often. Just catching up and hangin' at the beach."

Another returning favorite, Baton Rouge native CJ Solar tells me, "I've been going to 30A Songwriters Fest on and off since its first year. I drove over from Baton Rouge my senior year of high school to see my hero Jeffrey Steele in person for the first time. Jump ahead and I've been invited to play the ASCAP stage a handful of times over the years and am so excited to be back again as a performer! There's nothing like starting the year off in my favorite part of Florida, doing my favorite thing: playing songs for people who love them!"

Since its inception in 2010, 30A Songwriter's Festival has grown year after year, and is one of many endeavors made possible by Walton County Cultural Arts Alliance (CAA), a remarkable organization that adds so much to Northwest Florida's coastal community through numerous artistic and philanthropic endeavors. 30A Songwriters Festival is co-produced by Russell Carter Artist Management who has been the driving force behind booking the talent since the festival began in 2010. With 100% of the festival's net profits going toward supporting the CAA's mission to advance the arts in Walton County through education, leadership, advocacy, and the funding of special arts related programs within the community, festival goers are not only having a great time, they are also making a positive difference in the lives of so many that CAA serves.

Festival Co-Producer Russell Carter, President of Russell Carter Artist Management, has good reason to be immensely proud

of the festival he helped to create. Carter tells me, "This festival began as a small event and grew quickly into a premier one-of-a-kind showcase for world-class songwriters. Our goal was to curate a festival that presents the

absolute best in touring songwriters and performers. We always want our audiences to experience musicians representing diverse genres of music – jazz, blues, country, folk, Americana and rock, with just two stipula-

tions – they have to write their own music and they have to be really great at it!"

I asked Carter about some of the aspects of the 2026 festi-

Continued on page 30





On the Market, Get Set... Go! Attitude Makes the Difference



BY PAUL ANDRES DOMENECH

Every new year brings the same familiar question every Realtor hears: "So... how's the market looking?"

For some people, the answer feels negative. Yet very often, the problem is not truly the market itself. The real difference is attitude and expectation. When expectations don't line up with affordability and availability, frustration grows. When attitude aligns with reality and strategy, opportunity shows up.

The word that continues to define today's market is affordability. The key question for a

seller is simple: Is your home being priced in alignment with the buyers currently searching? When price meets reality, homes move. When price ignores reality, homes sit.

Real estate is fair in a unique way. If you sell for more in a strong market, you often pay more when you buy. If you buy at a discount, you likely sold at one too. Some people do catch amazing timing, but that usually comes from staying prepared, patient and engaged, not guessing perfectly. Good things happen to people who stay ready.

What to Expect Heading into Spring

Many people held off during the holidays and will now enter the market at once. That means competition will increase. Homes that didn't sell last year normally weren't victims of a "bad market." More often they were misaligned on price, presentation, or strategy. Look closely at what is currently not



selling; that tells the truth about buyer behavior.

The properties that did sell were the desirable ones. They were priced right, well-prepared, or offered value in location, upgrades, or lifestyle. It is rarely just "seasonal." It's about value that matches today's buyer.

Time on market also has a cost. Every extra month adds stress, mortgage interest, upkeep, utilities, and missed opportunity. Sometimes giving the buyer a slight advantage saves far more than waiting.

For Buyers

Be ready. The best homes still move fast, and sellers know spring brings activity. Have lending prepared and be willing to act when you see the right fit. Look at comparable properties and write your best offer the first time. Early in the year, multiple offers are common on desirable homes. Avoid the regret of saying, "I wish I would have gone higher."

And most of all, keep faith and a positive mindset. If you lose a home after doing your best, something better is ahead. We worry most where we trust least, move forward with confidence.

For Expired Listings

If your listing expired last year, it is not over. Regroup, reset, and recharge. Treat the property as a fresh listing in a fresh market. Review whether you had a real pricing and mar-

keting strategy or simply "listed and hoped." Identify the moment momentum stopped, and be honest about whether decisions were data-driven or emotional.

Sometimes the best plan is simple: start again, new photos, new presentation, new price alignment. There is a buyer for every home when strategy, price, and attitude all match.

The Bottom Line

Attitude is not everything, but it is the difference maker. With professional guidance comes competence. With competence comes confidence. And confidence shapes the attitude that attracts success.

Let's make 2026 a year of movement, clarity, and action. The market doesn't control us.

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Visit Thedomenechgroup.com, contact me directly at 850-543-1418, Paul@thedomenechgroup.com or contact a trusted real estate advisor.

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A New Way to Live in Retirement

Before the first streaks of sunrise settle over Inlet Beach, one member is already at the gym — stretching, lifting, moving with a quiet determination. “I wake up at 4:30,” he says with a shrug, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. “I work out, head back for breakfast, and then I decide: golf simulator... or swimming?”

He smiles. “I feel better than I have in years.”

Across the community, the day opens at its own gentle tempo. A woman clips a leash on her dog and walks toward one of the community’s dog-friendly outdoor areas, grateful for the easy routine they’ve settled into. Not long ago, she was living with her daughter in Alys Beach, watching Watersound Fountains being built across the highway. She never imagined it would one day be home.

“I thought, Those places aren’t for me,” she admits.

But when her daughter insisted she come take a look, everything shifted — the bright, thoughtfully designed apartments, the welcoming outdoor



spaces for her dog, the light, the openness, the surprising sense of possibility.

“After the first week,” she says, “there was no going back.”

The beauty of a morning here is that everyone’s version looks a little different. Some head to the balance studio for physical therapy. Others meet friends on the walking trails that curl through Watersound and 30A. Some hop on a bike. Some linger over coffee. Each person finds their own pace.

By mid-morning, the community hums with activity. One member laughs as she lists her schedule: “Today I had, back-to-back: physical therapy, a fitness class, book club, then happy hour.” She shakes her head, still amused. “It’s just kind of nonstop here.”

And yet, it’s never rushed. Life simply unfolds — with options around every corner.

For many, the choice to move to Watersound Fountains was about proximity. After years in



Georgia, far from children and grandchildren, one couple realized they wanted the holidays, the milestones, and the simple weekends back. Now their son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter live minutes away. “We do more now,” they say. “Especially with family so close.”

Afternoons often stretch into easy hours. Neighbors meet in the W Lounge. Others gather around the open hearth pizza oven, where flatbreads are rolled out right in front of them. On Fridays, The Mark dining room becomes the community’s favorite tradition — a dressed-up, reservations-only dinner with filet, snapper, grouper, and the kind of conversations people look forward to all week.

There’s always movement, always laughter, always someone waving from a walkway or

calling out a hello — the kind of natural, everyday community that makes a place feel alive.

What surprises many is not how much there is to do, but how effortless daily life feels here. The physical therapist is downstairs. The gym is steps away. The trails are safe and beautifully maintained. The beaches and local favorites are just a short drive. Every day can unfold at its own pace.

“You can do as much or as little as you want,” a member says as she waves to a neighbor. “It’s like living in a resort — but it feels like home.”

And maybe that’s the truest throughline here.

Occasionally, one member’s daughter will call and say, “Come home — come stay some.” And she’ll laugh and reply, “But I am home. This is my home.”

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BY GREG DURETTE, YOUR FLORIDA HEALTH CONNECTOR

Now that the Medicare Annual Election Period (AEP) is over (ended December 7th), you can finally take a breather from all those ads, phone calls and mailers—sort of. Come January 1st, you will have a chance to try out your new Medicare Advantage, Supplement and/or Prescription plan.

If you then find the plan you selected during the AEP is not right for you, all is not lost. You will get one more bite at the apple to make changes to your plan.

As with many situations, in order to have a good outcome, you will first have to ask the right questions. In this case, the questions you should ask yourself are:

- Did you sign up for a new

Advantage Plan or a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan during the last Annual Enrollment Period (AEP)?

• Do you have an existing Advantage Plan or a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan that renewed with a January 1st effective date?

If the answer to either of these questions is yes, then the Medicare Open Enrollment Period (OEP) is very important to you.

The OEP runs annually from January 1st to March 31st.

During this time, Advantage plan holders are given the option to make certain changes to the plan they selected in the AEP.

These allowed changes are:

- Cancel your stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan
- Drop your Medicare Advantage Plan and return to Original Medicare (A & B only)
- Enroll in a stand-alone Medicare Part D prescription drug plan

• Elect to change from one Medicare Advantage Plan to another either with the same insurance company or an entirely different one

Let's take a look at each option a bit deeper. First, why would someone elect to cancel their stand-alone Part D prescription plan? The principal reason one could have would be it was being replaced by other qualifying coverage. If you cancel without replacing, penalties will accrue and be waiting for you when you do put this coverage back in place at a later date. Plus, those penalties will be with you for what could be the rest of your life!

Second, there are a few rare circumstances when it makes sense for someone to cancel an Advantage plan and return to Original Medicare known as Part A and Part B. Usually this may have something to do with provider networks which are insufficient for the beneficiary or some other unusual event. Again, this rare circumstance



would require you to also remain in or enroll in a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan in order to avoid accruing the future penalties I just mentioned.

Remember, enrolling in a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan is a requirement if you do not have qualifying coverage elsewhere and want to avoid those penalties. If you neglected to get that done during the AEP, now is the time to look at this.

Last, some folks have a change of heart once they see the detailed materials of the Advantage plan they enrolled in during the AEP. Perhaps you find your HMO plan does not have the providers you need but,

a PPO plan does. Or perhaps, the terms of coverage are better in a plan different from your current plan. Maybe, another plan costs less (or even \$0!).

You don't need any reason to switch plans provided you do so before the OEP expires on March 31st. Just remember, you only get one chance to make this change. Once you do, you will have to keep that plan until the next AEP, which begins on October 15th of every year.

The best options for your particular situation should be thoroughly discussed with your insurance agent/broker to make sure you have all the facts about the choices you may be thinking about and, get all your questions answered.

Greg Durette is a qualified, licensed agent with Florida Health Connector providing Medicare throughout the State of Florida and is based in Niceville. He has been in the insurance industry for nearly 43 years and can be reached at his office at 850-842-2400 or his mobile at 978-509-2941.

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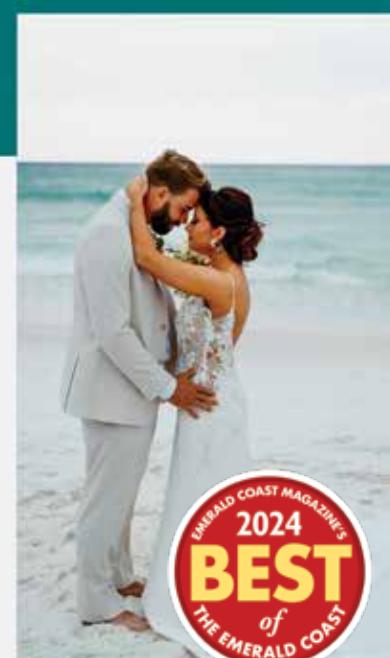
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Surtax is a Win for Okaloosa County

BY CAROLYN NEWCOMER
KETCHEL

The voter approved infrastructure surtax has been a hugely successful program that has allowed us to make significant infrastructure investments in Okaloosa County that will improve the daily lives of our residents for decades to come. Approved by citizens in 2016, it has raised more than \$136 million. These funds have been used to acquire matching grants for a total of \$279 million. Wait! There is more good news. Approximately 56% of the surtax is paid by tourists!

This 1/2 cent surtax has paid for over 300 projects ranging from roads to stormwater to public safety and sidewalks. We are particularly proud of the Southwest Crestview Bypass, that will soon be unveiled, the dirt road stabilization project in the north end, and installation of 12 communication towers throughout the county. These towers will allow public safety and law enforcement officials to communicate on one system in the event of a county-wide emergency. Some of our other completed projects are listed below:



- **A \$44,965 Sheriff Office project to replace and upgrade the vehicle fleet**, including safety vehicles such as evidence vans, water search vessels, patrol and dive vessels, surveillance and prisoner transport vehicles.

- **A \$185,724 sidewalk project to close gaps in developer installed sidewalks linking Indian Bayou Trail and Matthew Blvd.** in Destin. The project was completed

under budget and \$189,276 in unused funding was returned to the Surtax reserves.

- **A \$200,000 project to address persistent flooding in Bluewater Bay.** The county was awarded a hazard mitigation grant, comprising study/design and construction phases, along with requiring a 25% local match. This match included 18% from the Bluewater Bay Municipal Services Benefit Unit (MSBU) and 7% from the county.

- **A \$214,500 project to enhance all seven beach accessways on Okaloosa**

First Tee Gulf Coast Wins Back-to-Back National Title

Local junior golfers from Fort Walton Beach and Niceville brought home a national championship as First Tee Gulf Coast captured first place at the First Tee Greater New Orleans National Tournament, presented by Insperity Dec. 21-23 at Chateau Golf & Country Club in New Orleans. Team members Michelle Burt, Jasmine Nguyen, Tenley Sharron and Mason Dean Hampton, all local junior golfers from the Fort Walton Beach and Niceville area, rose to the top against elite competition from across the country. The victory marked a back-to-back national championship for First Tee Gulf Coast, as the team successfully defended its 2024 title.



high-level competition, teamwork and leadership development, showcasing not only golf skills but the core values emphasized by the First Tee program nationwide.

For more information about First Tee Gulf Coast or its youth programs, contact ty@firstteegulfcoast.org or sharron@firstteegulfcoast.org.

The national tournament brings together top First Tee participants for two days of

Island with newly designed crosswalks including installation of signs and flashers. These new crosswalks provide safe pedestrian access from the north side of Santa Rosa Boulevard to the beach access parks on the south side.

- **A \$287,850 project to address frequent storm-water flooding along Meigs Drive** in Shalimar. The completed project included installation of shoreline rip rap and sod replacement.

- **A \$431,618 project to improve the intersection of Lewis Turner Boulevard and Hospital Drive** near the newly improved Liza Jackson School in Fort Walton Beach. The project included storm water detention facilities, intersection upgrades and a new turn lane making the intersection safer for vehicles and pedestrians. Moreover, the project was completed under budget and the remaining allocation of \$68,382 was returned to the Surtax reserves to be utilized for additional future projects.

- **A \$682,901 project to address stormwater runoff and flooding of roadways in and around Standish Court and Lafitte Crescent** in Fort Walton Beach. The investment of \$682,901 in allocated Surtax

funding, coupled with \$420,432 of RESTORE grant funding allowed the County to replace the deteriorating pipe system with a modern, smooth-lined high-density polyethylene pipe network. Originally \$800,000 was allocated from Surtax Reserves and \$117,099 has been returned to the Surtax Reserves, reflecting our steadfast commitment to fiscal responsibility by leveraging strategic grant opportunities.

- **An \$857,029 project to improve Commons Drive in Destin.** The intersection of Commons Drive and Henderson Beach Drive was selected as a surtax project for the installation of a traffic signal to enhance safety and improve traffic flow. The project included turn lane enhancements, intersection upgrades, and improved pedestrian facilities. \$100,000 of the signalization funding was contributed by the City of Destin through developer funds.

- **A \$1,350,000 project to improve pedestrian traffic around Redwood Avenue and Plew Elementary School** in Niceville. Although there were some sidewalks in the area, connecting them was

Continued on page 26

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The Season of Maintenance: Why Small Actions Over Time Matter Most



By DANICA LAFRAIRE,
FISH WINDOW CLEANING

January has a way of making people feel like they're already behind.

The holidays are over, routines are settling back in, and suddenly we're surrounded by messages about transformation — new goals, new habits, new versions of ourselves. But most meaningful progress doesn't come from one big push at the start of the year. It comes from something far less glamorous: maintenance.

Maintenance doesn't get

much credit. It's quiet, repetitive, and often invisible. Yet it is what keeps homes comfortable, businesses running, bodies healthy, finances stable, and confidence intact. Small actions, taken consistently over time, don't just prevent problems — they build trust in ourselves and in the systems we rely on.

I see this principle every day in my work.

In window cleaning, maintenance is everything. Glass that is cared for regularly stays clear



where maintenance is most misunderstood. Firms like McGregor Financial Group help individuals and families focus on long-term strategy rather than quick wins. Wealth is rarely built in a single decision. It is built through steady planning, routine reviews, and thoughtful adjustments over time.

Dental care tells the

same story. Practices like Mid Bay Dental and Sea Breeze Endodontics know that most major dental issues don't appear overnight. Routine care helps address small concerns before they turn into painful — and expensive — problems.

What all of these examples have in common is consistency.

Research on habit formation shows that small, repeatable behaviors become automatic over time — often after just a couple of months of consistency. As those habits take root, something else happens too: confidence grows. Psychologists call it self-efficacy — the belief that we can follow through, handle challenges, and trust ourselves to maintain what matters.

That confidence does not come from grand gestures. It comes from keeping promises to ourselves in small ways. Scheduling the maintenance. Showing up for the workouts. Booking the check-ups. Taking care of things before they break.

Personally, this season has reinforced that strength isn't always loud. Sometimes it looks like quietly doing the work — even when no one's watching, even when progress feels slow. Especially then.

January doesn't have to be about reinventing your life. It can be about recommitting to what already works. Maintaining what matters. Trusting that small actions, done consistently, create not only long-term savings — but long-term confidence.

Because over time, maintenance isn't just what keeps things running. It is what helps us believe we can keep going.

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Reset & Refresh: A New Year's Guide to Comfort, Confidence and Care

BY LIESEL SCHMIDT

We've all been there, staring down the barrel at January 1 and thinking we should probably make some kind of resolution. But will we stick to it?

It's the perennial question—one that, by January 15, most of us have already proven to the negative.

But January doesn't have to mean broken resolutions. In fact, it doesn't even have to be about reinventing yourself. It's taking the opportunity to hit the reset button, to return to (or start) routines that fuel you, and to surround yourself with people and things that make everyday life feel lighter, brighter, and more fulfilling. At Blue Bay Lifestyle Co., we believe that self-care shouldn't feel like another untenable resolution—it should be something that feeds your soul.

We've curated a collection of things that we love—things that we think are perfect for bringing comfort and confidence to this

new year that has just begun. Think of this as a reset that starts on the inside...and looks great on the outside, too.

Find Your Mood

A reset begins with your environment—and we're firm believers that scent is tied to creating an experience for your mind and your body. Perfect for anyone who thinks that nothing in life needs to be boring, Whiskey River Co. offers a range of scented candles that will reset your mood while they brighten your space—major bonus points for the boldly snarky labels (we're big fans, ourselves). For beautiful fragrance minus the sass, Sweet Water Decor brings soft, clean scents perfect for slow mornings and cozy evenings. Think coffee mug in your hand as you watch the sun rise or a favorite glass of wine in front of the fireplace.

Secure Your Safety

Resetting your year also



means feeling a sense of safety and self-empowerment wherever you go—even if you're going alone. Birdie Personal Safety Alarms are a Glamour, Travel + Leisure and Cosmo top-pick for a reason: They're small, stylish, and super effective for keeping you safe. Read: LOUD. Clipped to a gym bag, purse, or just on your keychain, Birdie offers you peace of mind without sacrificing style—because personal safety can pack a big punch without looking the part. Plus, it's TSA and security check-

point friendly, which means you won't have to surrender it before getting on a plane or going into a concert.

Walk with Purpose

Your feet carry you through every single step of your entire year (some good, some not so good), so it should be a priority to give them the care they deserve. To that end, Birkenstock and Aetrex are brands built around the concept of combining anatomically designed support with style. The OG of

iconic comfort, Birkenstock sandals and clogs offer a selection of modern neutrals and fresh, seasonal colors that you'll never want to take off. Aetrex shoes, like their insoles, are engineered to encourage proper alignment and all-day wear, with styles ranging from sporty casual to classy and sassy. Because a style reset can be as simple as wearing shoes that make you feel good.

Dress for You

Known for their soft, breathable, and impossibly comfortable recycled fabrics, Vuori's performance wear make moving your body feel as natural as breathing—though, some days all you want to do is just stay in and cuddle up on the couch (we don't judge, we have those days, too). So whether your brand of self-care includes morning walks with your fur baby, Pilates with your bestie, or simply enjoying the art of doing nothing, Vuori

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Comedy Legend Yakov Smirnoff Brings Heart, Humor and Hope to Destin

TV and film star and comedy legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to Destin to perform his most up-close and personal shows ever. From his first appearance on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson to his most recent return with Jimmy Fallon, Yakov's career has truly stood the test of time.

A beloved regular on the hit TV comedy Night Court, Smirnoff has also appeared in films alongside Tom Hanks, Meryl Streep, Robin Williams, Jack Nicholson and Richard Pryor. He is set to join Mark Wahlberg in a brand-new feature film scheduled for worldwide release in late 2026.

Yakov's incredible journey began in 1977 when he left his

homeland in the former Soviet Union to pursue the American dream. His charming, insightful perspective as a newcomer to America quickly resonated with audiences, propelling him to the top of the comedy world and leading to success on both the big screen and television. His PBS television special Happily Ever After was named "Best Special" in both 2016 and 2017, and he has had the rare honor of performing for four U.S. presidents.

More than just jokes, Yakov Smirnoff's comedy is a journey of heart, humor and hope. His storytelling blends innocence with wisdom, absurdity with insight, and laughter with humanity, appealing to families, cou-

ples and anyone seeking clean, timeless comedy with genuine meaning.

Yakov will perform in Destin on Feb. 6, 7 and 8, with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes at The Palms of Destin Resort. The venue features an intimate showroom with excellent table seating, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, and plentiful free parking. The Palms is also home to a year-round house show produced by Hollywood-based entertainment producer Bart Rockett, featuring never-before-seen magic, illusions and hilarious comedy ventriloquism. While written for adults, the show is family-friendly and regularly enjoyed by children as well.

Tickets for Yakov Smirnoff's performances, as well as other shows at The Palms, are available at MagicDestin.com. Scroll down on the home page to find Yakov's link or explore addition-

al performances. Reservations may also be made by emailing the box office at MagicTicketAgent@gmail.com.

TV/Film Star & Comedy Legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to Destin to perform his most up-close & personal shows ever!



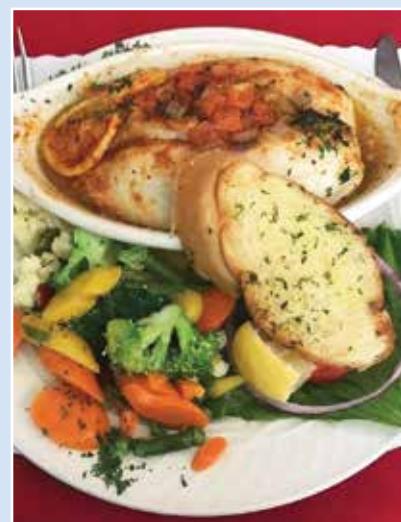
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Reservations Required. Visit MAGICDestin.com or Yakov.com (scroll down on home page for Destin shows)

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In 2001, Magnolia Grill in Fort Walton Beach opened its doors after a renovation that took 18 months—and it's been thriving since. A local's favorite dubbed "The Museum That Serves Food," you'll find equal parts museum and dining establishment. Its second floor contains artifacts from World War II, Vietnam and other segments of American history. And downstairs—is where you'll find lunch favorites such as Meatloaf with Mashed Potatoes, Crab Cake with Fettuccine and Shrimp Alfredo Sauce, Red Beans and Rice and many types of burgers, sandwiches, soups and salads. For dinner, savor divine Italian dishes such as Italian Sausage and Peppers with Marinara Sauce and Filet Tips Florentina. But there's also steaks, seafood "Camp Walton style" and even a kids' menu. Hours: Lunch M-F 11-2; Dinner M-Th 5-8; F-Sat 5-9; Closed Sundays.

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BY SCOTT MILLER

Here along the Emerald Coast, we're fortunate to have some of the best sports bars and restaurants around, ready and waiting to welcome us. They serve up great food, cold drinks, and make every game feel like a championship. So grab your crew, claim your spot and get in on the action — I hope to see you there!

AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

Attention all die hard football fans, AJ's boasts the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor, where you can watch your favorite games on the BIG, BIG screen surrounded by the energy and beauty of the Destin Harbor. AJ's serves up delicious daily specials, mouth-watering drinks plus entertaining live music all month, too. Don't miss any of the action!

For 40 years, AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar has been serving cold Gulf Coast oysters and cool libations. What began as a popular local hang out known for fresh oysters and cold beer has grown into one of the most iconic "hot spots" on the Destin Harbor. From its humble be-

Best Places to Watch Your Favorite Teams

ginning shucking oysters off the deck behind a small trailer on the Destin Harbor, it has grown to four locations along our Emerald Coast, serving fresh seafood, live music and exciting water activities in the Destin area. Come on down to AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar all season long.

(850) 837-1913
116 Harbor Blvd.
ajsdestin.com

AJ's on the Bayou

Located at the base of the Cinco Bayou Bridge in Fort Walton Beach, AJ's on the Bayou offers a beautiful waterfront setting with both indoor seating and an open-air deck overlooking the bayou. It's the perfect spot to catch a football game outdoors while sipping a mimosa and enjoying a bite to eat. AJ's serves brunch with bottomless mimosas for just \$10.95 with food purchase, plus daily weekday lunch specials for \$12.95 including iced tea. Add in live music or entertainment every day, and you've got one lively destination where the food, fun, and football never stop.

200 NE Eglin Pkwy, FWB
(850) 226-7579
ajsonthebayou.com

AJ's Oyster Shanty - Okaloosa Island

A dozen for me; a dozen for you! Located on Okaloosa Island, AJ's Oyster Shanty serves up fresh, cold oysters, fresh seafood and the best live music on the Island. Don't miss the

Thursday Prime Rib Dinner Special - enjoy a 10 oz. cut of prime rib served with baked potato and side salad, with au jus and horseradish cream sauce for \$22.95 every Thursday at 4 p.m. Key Lime Pie is available all day, every day! Join us for Karaoke every Wednesday night at 7 p.m. and live music all other nights! The most fun on the Island!

ajsoystershanty.com
108 Santa Rosa Blvd, FWB
(850) 226-8108

FUBAR Pizza Bar

Looking for a favorite place to watch your favorite football teams? Welcome to FUBAR pizza bar nestled on Okaloosa Island. Locally owned and family friendly, Fubar is known for its almost-famous pizza and wings and carries all sports games and live entertainment, along with impeccable service. You can enjoy all that while enjoying the waterfront view.

FUBAR has plenty of games for the kids along with pool tables, corn hole, dart boards and more. When out on the water all day, come dock your boat on one of FUBAR'S boat slips and enjoy the incredible view. Feel free to bring along your furry friends to join you on the patio.

Need the perfect space to host a party or event? FUBAR is equipped with numerous private sections with the option of having a private bar as well. The outside deck can hold up to 300 people comfortably and can be

sectioned off to fit your needs. In addition to the pizza and wings, FUBAR can customize a menu for you from Italian food to Prime Rib and everything in between. Open 7 days from 11 a.m.-2 a.m.

850-226-7084
114 Amberjack Dr.,
Okaloosa Island
fubarfwb.com

The Boardwalk On Okaloosa Island

As us locals know, The Boardwalk is a popular destination. With its ideal location on the Gulf, convenient parking and wide range of activities, it's the perfect place to shop, savor various flavors of cuisine, and take in the incredible views of the Emerald Coast. Want to watch football? Then head to restaurants like Rockin Tacos, The Crab Trap, Floyd's Shrimp Shack or Al's Beach Club & Burger Bar, where you can watch your favorite teams with breathtaking views and breaks for walks on the beach! Sandy toes and salty swim suits are welcome.

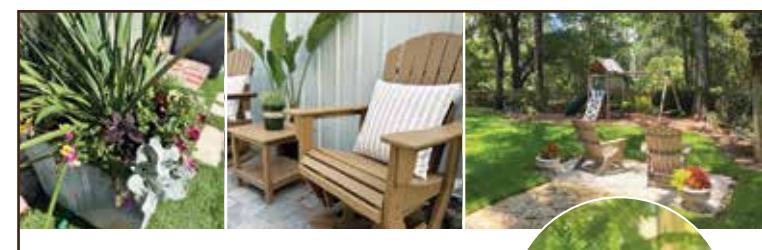
The Boardwalk is an official county park with public beach access, along with free parking, pavilions, picnic tables, public restrooms and outdoor showers for beachgoers.

The Boardwalk hosts community events such as the Emerald Coast Motorcycle Challenge, coastal beach cleanups, "Tricks and Treasures" Halloween event and the New Year's Day pelican plunge. It is also home of two legendary volleyball tournaments: Emerald Coast Volleyball Week in the spring, and the Emerald Coast Fall Classic.

(850) 301-0959
1450 Miracle Strip Pkwy SE,
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theboardwalkoi.com

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Derrick Brooks Headlines 2026 ASA Banquet

Get ready for an inspiring evening of recognition, community and athletic excellence as the All Sports Association (ASA) hosts its 2026 Annual Awards Banquet on Friday, February 20, 5:30 p.m. at the Destin / Fort Walton Beach Convention Center. The banquet promises to bring together athletes, community leaders, coaches and sponsors in Northwest Florida for an evening to remember.

A Star-Studded Keynote

This year's keynote speaker is NFL Hall of Famer Derrick Brooks — Super-Bowl champion, defensive powerhouse and committed community leader. With 11 Pro Bowl selections, nine All-Pro honors and induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2014, Brooks brings not only elite athletic credibility, but a passion for service and character.

You can expect a formal awards dinner celebrating the

top athletes, coaches and civic partners of 2025–2026, with honors presented to individuals who excelled not only on the field, but also in the classroom and the community. Brooks' keynote address will offer powerful insights on leadership, perseverance and success in sports and in life. In addition, you'll enjoy opportunities to network with local sports programs, sponsors and youth volunteers and also receive updates on upcoming ASA initiatives and the distribution of funds that support youth-focused sports and service organizations throughout the region.

The ASA Mission

The All Sports Association was founded in 1970 under the leadership of Colonel Al Byrne, with the first banquet held at the Holiday Inn on Okaloosa Island. From those modest beginnings, ASA's membership of volunteers has grown to raise funds and provide time-based service to sup-



port youth sports and community programs across the Emerald Coast.

Funded primarily through the awards banquet and an annual golf tournament, the organization channels its proceeds to local non-profits including the Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast, Special Olympics Florida-Okaloosa, the Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center and Okaloosa Walton FCA.

At the heart of the ASA's recognition program lies a simple, yet powerful, standard: the athletes honored must excel not only in their sport but also in their academics and community involvement. Through the ban-

quet and associated awards, ASA underscores the belief that true excellence includes character, responsibility and service.

Recipients are those who maintain strong grades, are active in their schools and volunteer in the community — reflecting ASA's full mission to boost youth, sport and citizenship alike.

Over the years, ASA's banquet has hosted renowned keynote speakers who bring experience, inspiration and perspective to the local stage among them Herschel Walker, Bo Jackson, Tim Tebow, Nick Saban, Urban Meyer, Chad Hennings and several others. From professional athletes to community champions, these voices have helped elevate the banquet beyond mere awards to a moment of collective motivation and connection.

For athletes, coaches, volunteers and sponsors in our region, the ASA banquet is more than a gala—it's a celebration of the

values we prize: teamwork, dedication, citizenship and community investment. It brings together high school and youth sports programs, local businesses, civic leaders and families under one roof to honor triumphs and galvanize support for what's next.

With Derrick Brooks as this year's keynote, the event carries added prestige and excitement—offering both young athletes and the wider community a chance to hear from someone who not only mastered football, but leveraged his platform for impact.

Want to Help?

Those interested in sponsorships, table reservations or event participation can visit the ASA website: www.allsportsassociation.com.

Join on February 20, 2026, as we celebrate champions in sport, service and character — and help invest in the bright future of youth athletics right here on the Emerald Coast.

RESET

continued from page 15

is elevated athleisure that supports every version of you.

A new year is the perfect moment to refine—not replace—

your wardrobe. Think effortless silhouettes, coastal textures, and pieces that carry confidence into your everyday—wherever that may lead. We love Liverpool separates for their polished denim, elevated basics, and versatile

layers. Lovestitch offers Boho-inspired, breezy, and beautifully draped tops and dresses, while The North Face is the perfect performance outerwear for cool coastal days outside. Try Flag & Anthem for classic Americana

style with modern ease, Rusty for more casual, surf-inspired pieces ideal for laid-back living or Roarke's bold prints and quality construction. Refreshing your wardrobe doesn't have to mean completely overhauling your style—it means choosing

pieces that help you feel more like you.

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DERRICK BROOKS

NFL HALL OF FAMER | SUPER BOWL CHAMPION | COMMUNITY LEADER

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20TH, 2026

Golf Series: The Golf Club at Bluewater Bay Welcomes Winter Golfers



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

There are “come back kids” and then there are those special events or times when people fight to be sure a precious institution remains in place for the community and visitors to enjoy.

The story of the fight two years ago to save the Bluewater Bay Golf Course — and the successful effort to raise \$2.5 million to do so — is well known throughout the community. Residents rallied behind the cause, determined to preserve one of Bluewater Bay’s most cherished assets. Today, the Golf Club at

Bluewater is under the guidance of Elite Golf management and is experiencing a true comeback. Saving the course not only protected a beloved local landmark, but also preserved a precious and vital green space for the entire community to enjoy.

Nestled among homes in the Bluewater Bay community, golfers enjoy a course layout that is challenging, but fair. Tee times can be booked with Golf Now or by phoning the pro shop. With scenic views that often distract in a positive way, the course can now be enjoyed by golfers at all levels of play. With overseeded greens and tee boxes as well as reasonable fees, the beautiful course is ready for the winter. This could not have been accomplished without the efforts of Golf Course Superintendent, Alfredo Francisco, and his staff.

Stephan Kleemeyer, general manager, has worked tirelessly over the past year to ensure growth and success for the club. With the added bonus of now



having a full-service restaurant, the Blue Tee, golfers and residents can enjoy breakfast, lunch or dinner from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. It might be chilly in January, but a warm lunch with accompanying beverage should be a perfect way to share stories of how an approach shot to the green resulted in a birdie on the hole! Plans are underway for a welcome snowbird party in January. I sense that

once parties become part of the fabric of this club, membership will enjoy more than watching a tee shot head straight down the fairway.

Membership is the heart and soul of a golf course and new member rates encourage golfers to join. Golf carts are included in the rate. Yes, public play is important, but membership is the key to continued revenue to

support the club.

So, congratulations, Preserve Bluewater Bay, INC. You have protected 150 acres of valuable, green space for community enjoyment and golf club operations. Golfers and the Bluewater Bay community are the beneficiaries of this gift to the Florida Panhandle!



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Healthy Aging Starts with Daily Movement

BY: KELLY STALNAKER, BAYWIND MEDICAL

January often inspires many of us to recommit to fitness after a season of indulgence and celebration. But taking care of our bodies should be a year-round commitment, a long-term investment towards better health. Research consistently shows the value of staying active every day, especially as we grow older. For seniors, regular physical activity delivers a wide range of important benefits: it boosts mood, helps lower blood pressure, supports fine motor skills, and significantly reduces the risk of falls by improving strength and balance. Staying active can also lower the

likelihood of developing chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and dementia.

Beginning a fitness routine may feel daunting, but becoming more active is often easier than it seems. Many effective exercises are completely free and require little to no equipment. Activity can fit into any schedule, and it can be enjoyed solo or with friends. It's one of the most accessible and rewarding forms of self-care. Seniors have plenty of options for staying active, from walking and swimming to gardening or joining social wellness programs (check out your local senior center). For those who prefer to stay indoors, there are

countless ways to keep moving right at home. Online videos offer easy-to-follow workout ideas using everyday household items, making it convenient to stay active anytime and anywhere.

Maintaining good health doesn't have to be complicated; it can start with just a few simple steps. First and foremost, consult your physician prior to beginning any fitness program. Seek guidance from your healthcare professional by openly discussing your plans and goals, to ensure your approach is safe. You may also consider meeting with a personal trainer who can design a strategy that fits your needs. Set realistic goals for yourself,



especially important for seniors. Regular movement can reduce your risk of chronic health conditions, and improve your mood, strength and balance. At Baywind Medical (formerly J&B Medical), we carry a variety of products to support older adults in reaching their health and wellness goals: resistance bands, pedal exercisers, bamboo socks, walking aids and even recovery tools to help with post-workout muscle soreness. Stop by 540 E. John Sims Pkwy. in Niceville, Monday through Friday from

9-5, to see how we can help you on your fitness journey. As Kenneth Cooper, pioneer of aerobics, once said, "We do not stop moving because we grow old; we grow old because we stop moving."

increase activity gradually and schedule movement into your week to help you stay consistent. Invite a friend or loved one to join you! It can boost motivation and build accountability.

Living an active lifestyle is beneficial at any age, but it is

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FWB Native Eric Rushford Honored on 2026 Donate Life Rose Parade Float

Fort Walton Beach native Eric Rushford was honored on one of the world's most visible stages on New Year's Day when OneLegacy featured his legacy on the 2026 Donate Life Rose Parade® Float in Pasadena, California.

Rushford, a 22-year-old remembered by family and friends as a kind and generous young man who loved playing soccer and mentoring young athletes, saved and healed multiple lives through organ and tissue donation. His life and legacy were commemorated through a floral portrait, known as a floragraph, displayed on the 2026 float, Treasure Every Moment Together, during the iconic Rose Parade on Jan. 1.

Rushford was one of 14 cornea and tissue donors honored, alongside a young tissue recipient whose life was restored through donation. Together, the donors recognized this year helped heal the lives

of more than 1,000 children and adults across the country, highlighting the profound impact of organ, eye and tissue donation.

Nationally, a single tissue donor can improve the lives of more than 75 people through donations that include heart valves, bone grafts, skin for burn survivors, and ligaments and nerves that restore mobility. Each year, approximately 60,000 tissue donors provide lifesaving and life-enhancing transplants, with an estimated 2.5 million tissue transplants performed annually.

Now in its 23rd year, the OneLegacy Donate Life Rose Parade Float remains the world's most visible campaign promoting organ, eye and tissue donation. Watched by millions worldwide, the float delivered a powerful reminder that donation saves lives and allows generosity, like Rushford's, to live on.



New Year, New You: Setting Realistic Aesthetic Goals



BY DR. CLARK, BLUEWATER
PLASTIC SURGERY

As the holiday season winds down, many of us begin to reflect on the year behind us and set intentions for the one ahead. While health and wellness resolutions are common in January, more patients are also choosing to include aesthetic goals as part of their personal care and confidence-building journey. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we

maintain a youthful appearance in a professional setting or align their outward appearance with the vibrancy they feel inside. When your motivation comes from self-respect rather than comparison or pressure, the experience is far more rewarding.

Setting the right goals is equally important. Success doesn't come from doing everything at once—it comes from choosing steps that fit your lifestyle, health, budget, and timeline. Some patients start with subtle enhancements such as a refreshed skincare regimen or trying Botox for the first time. Others are ready to address a single feature that has bothered them for years or explore a larger transformation. During your consultation, we take time to discuss what's realistic, what options make sense, what timing looks like, and whether surgery

care can support a larger commitment to confidence, wellness, and self-care in the year ahead. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we approach every patient's goals with education, safety, discretion, and thoughtful guidance at the forefront.

To schedule a private consul-

tation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Surgery today. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, my practice is dedicated exclusively to cosmetic surgery, and I have performed thousands of procedures over the last 25 years. My highest priorities are patient safety and

superior results. With more than 300 five-star reviews, I let my patients' experiences speak for themselves.

Call 850.530.6064 or visit blue-waterplasticsurgery.com for more information or to make an appointment.

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 Wellness

How to Subtract Fat From Your Body - Part II



BY KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

Happy New Year! This year can be a year of change, of promise and of surprises. Personally, I am looking forward to stepping into new habits and new adventures. I hope yours will be a year of adventure and surprises too!

Last month, we covered the effects of food preservatives in processed food. We also dis-

cussed the role of our gut and what can happen when we don't treat it right. So, what's next?

#3 Over Eating

Calories in and calories out. Eating too many calories in a short amount of time adds fat, because what the body can't convert it stores. Eating carbohydrates causes our glycemic index to rise. This releases energy more quickly and causes us to feel hungry sooner which leads to eating more. On the flip side, when we eat low glycemic meals, energy is released over time and we feel fuller longer; thus we eat less. Bottom line, our bodies can only convert so many carbohydrates into energy at a time. Did you know that if you reduce your food intake by 500 calories per day (182,500 calories per year) you have the potential to lose of 52 pounds of fat over one year?



Suggestions: Eat smaller meals and focus on whole foods vs. processed foods. Search for a glycemic foods index that you like and keep it in the kitchen. This index can aid in substituting higher glycemic foods for lower options. Space your meals throughout the day, eating less in the evening. Be sure you have fiber in each meal. Lastly, practice eating more slowly which helps with eating less.

#4 Slow Metabolism

Learning what can cause a

slow metabolism can help us make the changes to keep our metabolism running in our favor.

Skipping meals means we have less glucose (fuel). So, our metabolism slows down to conserve energy.

If the body is triggered into starvation mode, our next meal can be stored as fat to be used later.

Making poor choices or overeating when we eat again can keep the body's metabolism slow. The body learns and will

protect itself by maintaining a healthy fat storage.

Stress releases hormones that also aid in fat storage.

We need micro-nutrients as these are difficult to get in our diet. Other important nutrients are magnesium, alpha lipoic acid, coenzyme Q10 and curcumin turmeric extract as well as milk thistle and N-acetyl-L-cysteine (aids the liver). These nutrients need to be in their correct forms and amounts in order to be processed and utilized efficiently in the body.

We also need to exercise. In order to maximize the effectiveness of our efforts, we should move to reach our maximum heart rate (Look up the equation of finding your maximum heart rate) for one minute then rest for two minutes. Repeat; 10 cycles = 30 minutes. The body will continue to burn fat for 12-14 hours. Building muscle also burns fat, so consider adding resistance to your exercises.

Looking at things differently or 'out of the box' from our current thought processes can create change and that change can create success. It's not about a quick fix; it's about the long haul. The long haul creates permanent change and allows the body to heal and function the way it was created to. Our bodies depend on our minds and habits, so they can deliver on everything we expect from them.

Love your body and it will love you back. Here's to Health! succeed.hdhl@gmail.com

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Time to Get the Plump Out

Aren't You Done Eating Yet?



BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

It's almost over! Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years. If you are anything like me, you'll be five pounds heavier with stairs harder than usual. Eating is such a social event and Thanksgiving starts the social smorgasbord. One scoop of everything followed by seconds of the good stuff. A few cookies left on the sheet, a bit of potatoes in the pan, one lonely slice of pie? And work on those left overs just before bed. I can hear Amanda asking, "Aren't you done eating yet?" as I'm bringing some scraps to bed.

Well, once the holidays are over, it's the time to hear it. I love you all, but you're plumping out. It's the time to get life under control and start working

towards the same goal we all have. Eat better, get active, lose weight, feel better. It sounds so easy. Change is hard, but The Hormone Restoration Center can help you achieve your goals.

It's not all about weight loss, but it's a good start. Weight loss has multiple causes, so any solution needs to be customized to you. That is what we do so well. After providing a comprehensive consultation, discussing symptoms and reviewing labs, we give our recommendation and provide a range of options for the best path to success.

Most important, and often forgotten, is hormone optimization. If your estrogen is out of whack or your thyroid is not optimal, you will never lose weight. Unfortunately, traditional medicine does not look at labs properly and that's why you will always hear, "Everything's normal." It's not.

Optimizing hormones can significantly reduce weight. It also routinely improves sleep, mood, libido and energy while eliminating fatigue, brain fog, hair loss and sexual dysfunction.

Proper thyroid function can supercharge weight loss, increase energy levels, as well as



promote healthy hair growth and healthier skin. Plus optimizing thyroid reduces cardiovascular risk. Why would you not?

GLP-1 options like Semaglutide and Tirzepatide provide almost magical results. I have never seen medications that work so well to help lose weight while also reducing chronic diseases.

Sometimes motivation and weight loss are just a micronutrient away. Our practitioners can

tailor supplement recommendations to your needs ensuring you maximize every ounce of effort you put in.

Myth-Busting: Debunking Common Misconceptions

"Weight loss medications don't require lifestyle changes."

Truth: For us, the easy part is losing the weight. The hard part is keeping it off. Ultimately, no matter what we do to help you

get the weight off, you will be destined to gain the weight back until you develop healthy habits to keep the weight off.

Luckily for you, at The Hormone Restoration Center we can do the heavy lifting for you. We will get you on track and headed in the right direction. Once your weight loss starts, energy increases, and mood improves, the hard stuff just gets easier.

Join our family here at The Hormone Restoration Center; we'll support you every step of the way. Together, we will create a personalized plan that aligns with your goals and helps you embrace a healthier, happier you.

Reach out to us today at 850-837-1271 and let's kickstart your New Year with a new approach to weight loss and wellness!



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Get the Smile You Deserve

Smile with Confidence Again

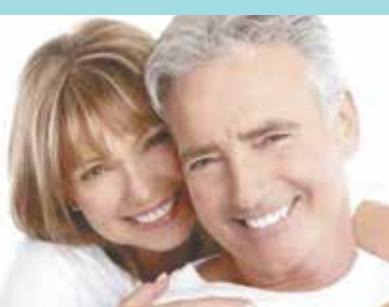
- Are you embarrassed about smiling in front of people?
- Do you ever put your hand up to cover your smile?
- Do you dislike your smile in photographs?
- When you look through magazines, do you envy the models' smiles?
- Do you wish your teeth were whiter?
- Do you think you show too much or too little of your teeth when you smile?
- Would you like to change the way your teeth or gums are shaped?
- Do you have gaps or spaces in between your teeth?

If the answer is "yes" to any of these questions, you may be a good candidate for **A Smile Makeover**.



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 Business
SURTAX*continued from page 13*

essential for enhanced pedestrian safety. This project also included enhanced stormwater systems and improved safety along Redwood Avenue and the intersections of Redwood, 18th Street, and Sycamore Avenue. The City of Niceville donated half the cost of extending the

sidewalk from Valparaiso Boulevard to 11th Street.

- **A \$1.5M project to install sidewalks along Old Bethel Road west of Highway 85**, east of Davidson Middle School to Normandy Road in north Crestview along with crosswalk improvement and handrails at appropriate locations.

- **A \$1,918,093 project to**

install a Mass Notification

System which allows for video monitoring and tracking of forty public school buses by the Emergency Operations Center which provides significantly faster communication and coordinated responses to safety issues faced by our local schools. Also included in this project was the purchase of ballistic projection equipment and K-9-unit

replacements.

- **A \$3,100,000 project to construct a Sheriff's Office Training Center** which offers several benefits including improved joint response and capabilities to active assailants, expanded and improved training capabilities to greater quantities of 1st responders (Police, Fire, EMS), and allowing for indoor scenario-based training capabilities.

- **A \$3,127,171 project to improve the aging stormwater infrastructure along 9th Ave.** and 6th Street in Port Dixie (Shalimar).

In addition, there are upcoming projects funded by surtax:

Lewis Turner & Poquito Rd traffic signal (north Fort Walton Beach).

In 2026, FDOT will design the project and will likely draft an agreement for the County to pay for half of the construction cost with Surtax.

Lloyd Street Drainage (central Fort Walton Beach)

This project includes stormwater modeling, pipe inspection, design and construction of stormwater infrastructure in the drainage basin that includes Lloyd Street and Mayflower Avenue and outfalls to Cinco Bayou.

Beachview Drive Drainage (eastern Fort Walton Beach)

This project will alleviate the flooding that occurs on Beachview Drive at the intersection with Eglin Parkway near the Eglin Federal Credit Union. The project is being done in coordination with FDOT because Eglin Parkway also floods at this location.

John King Road Widening (south Crestview)

Construction will occur in 2026. This project will provide dual left turns onto, and off of John King Road at SR 85.

Santa Rosa Boulevard Improvements (Okaloosa Island)

Construction is scheduled for 2026 to improve Santa Rosa Boulevard between US 98 and the 1st Beach Park.

College Blvd Multi-use Path (north Niceville)

Provides a multi-use path along the south side of College Blvd from Palm to Forest and the west side of Forest from College Blvd to Rocky Bayou.

Traffic Management Center

Will attach to the Emergency Operations Center in Niceville and provide real-time monitoring and adjustment capabilities for traffic signals and arterials in Okaloosa County.

Surtax has been a win for our community. Please visit our website at <https://myokaloosa.com/bcc/infrastructureprojects> to learn more about how we have assisted in improving military readiness, addressed seven environmental and flood reduction projects, and helped save lives by providing additional law enforcement, safety signage and equipment. A citizen oversight committee, appointed by county commissioners, monitors the funds and makes recommendations of projects. Without surtax revenue, completion of these projects would have required an increase of 19% of property tax.

In 2026, the citizens will once again have an opportunity to vote for extending this 1/2 cent surtax to assist the county in building and improving roads and bridges, funding essential law enforcement and public safety facilities, and addressing flood control and water quality improvements for another 10 years to 2038. Please consider the good work that has been accomplished when you go to the polls to vote.

It is an honor to serve as you Commissioner.

Carolyn Ketchel is Okaloosa County Commissioner, District 2. She can be reached at CKetchel@myokaloosa.com or 850-651-7105.

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By SEAN DIETRICH

A lot has changed in a year. The entire world has changed. Many will tell you that 2025 has been full of bad stuff—the media, for example.

Tune in to the news. You will see footage of explosions, nuclear weapons, and random acts of reality TV. But if you look deeper, you'll see good peeking through the surface.

For starters, on September 12, Betty Kellenberger made history by becoming the oldest woman to complete a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail.

Betty began her hike, amazingly, almost immediately after knee replacement surgery. She traversed muddy bogs, snow, cold rain, and impossible rocks.

After completing her hike she told reporters, "I decided the Lord must love rocks because He made so many of them."

Betty Kellenberger is 80 years old.

Also, Americans are making true progress in the fight against technological slavery. As of December, 35 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., have enacted laws effectively banning student cellphone usage in classrooms.

Now, if only we could get Congress to ban speakerphone calls in supermarkets.

Also, this year, Japan elected its first female prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, shattering a centuries-old glass ceiling.

Takaichi is turning out to be a real go-getter, saying she sleeps two hours per night, "four hours at the longest." Her first words in office were: "I will abandon the idea of a 'work-life balance'—I will work, work, work, work and work."

Takaichi's husband has likewise pledged to abandon the "work-life balance idea" and commits to playing significantly more golf.

The world also got its first American Pope, Robert Francis Prevost. Pope Leo XIV was born in Chicago, raised in Dolton, Illinois, and he roots for

the White Sox. Unfortunately, there is a conflict of interest inasmuch as God is a Braves fan.

Either way, Pope "Bob" is a regular guy. That's why people love him. He watches movies. Makes jokes. And shortly before participating in a holy ceremony

And, in case you were wondering, violent crime is lower than it's been in decades. A lot lower, actually.

The U.S. homicide rate, in only one year, has dropped by 20 percent. There have also been significant drops in committed crimes, such as rape, robbery, aggravated assault, vehicle theft, burglary, and pop-country rap.

In ecological news, a recent study of Yellowstone National Park revealed that the migration of 5,000 bison across the park's grasslands is successfully restoring ancient patterns, reshaping the landscape to pre-civilization conditions. A feat which, 20 years ago, ecologists would have told you was impossible, after which they would've told you to refill their veggie beers.

I could go on and on. Heart attack deaths dropped by nearly 90 percent since 1970.

Green sea turtles were removed from the endangered species list—global population has increased by 30 percent.

Misty Combs, a Kentucky registered nurse, saved a drunk raccoon by administering CPR.

A new therapy is capable of slowing Huntington's disease. For the first time in history, treatments have slowed progression by nearly 75 percent.

After almost 20 years off the air, "Reading Rainbow" is back on television.

Nine Guam kingfishers—



ny in the Sistine Chapel, the Pope was seen by several cardinals—really—playing Wordle on his phone.

The Pope told reporters, "I use a different word for Worlde every day, so there's no set starting word."

This past year also saw major medical breakthroughs. Particularly in the treatment of blindness.

Herculean advances in gene therapy, optogenetics, and wireless retinal prosthetic implants are already partially restoring vision in some.

The PRIMA subretinal implant is a two-part device consisting of a small camera, mounted on a pair of smart-glasses, capturing images and instantaneously projecting them via infrared light to a wireless chip embedded within the eye.

A new therapy is capable of slowing Huntington's disease. For the first time in history, treatments have slowed progression by nearly 75 percent.

After almost 20 years off the air, "Reading Rainbow" is back on television.

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Sean of the South: Happy 2026

previously extinct birds—were released into the wild. The species has not been seen since 1988.

The Antarctic hole in the ozone layer has shrunk to its smallest size in three decades.

A doctor in London discovered a way to successfully treat brain cancer in infants.

Advances in finding a cure for HIV were made by Melbourne scientists who found a groundbreaking way to force

the virus out of hiding.

So a lot has happened, as I say. But if you ask me, the best news of this past year isn't found in the headlines. Neither is it found in all the amazing advances, nor the wondrous beauty humanity is capable of. To me, the best news of 2025 is that you're still here.

I love you dearly, whoever you are.

Happy 2026.

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 Musing


BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

January 2026 marks the beginning of America's 250th anniversary—a milestone few nations reach with freedom intact. This is more than a date on the calendar; it is a moment for national reflection. Before the fireworks, speeches and celebrations in July, we begin the year by reflecting on the spiritual foundations that shaped this remarkable Republic and by looking forward to the responsibilities that now rest upon true patriots.

When the founders declared independence, they did so with remarkable clarity about the source of human liberty. Their appeal was not to kings, armies or political theories—it was to Almighty God. The Declaration of Independence bases our rights

on the Creator, appeals to the Supreme Judge of the world and concludes with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence. These were not poetic boastings. They were convictions so deeply held that men were willing to lose everything and die for them.

Scripture affirms this truth: *“Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it”* (Psalm 127:1). America's survival—against odds that seemed insurmountable—testifies to a Providential Hand

guiding her early steps. Washington himself spoke repeatedly of miracles that preserved the cause of liberty, and the nation took shape under the shadow of God's mercy.

But, anniversaries do more



than connect us to the past—they challenge us in the present. John Adams warned that our Constitution was meant only for moral and religious people. Liberty needs character. Freedom without virtue turns into license,

and license ultimately leads to bondage. As Scripture reminds us, *“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty”* (2 Corinthians 3:17). True freedom—personal and national—comes from hearts aligned with God's truth.

As America approaches its 250th year, we stand at a crossroads. Moral confusion obscures truths once seen as obvious. Gratitude has too often been replaced by entitlement, and acknowledging God—so fundamental to our founding—now gets labeled as

intrusive. The ancient warning of Deuteronomy echoes through the ages: *“Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God”* (Deuteronomy 8:11). A nation forgets God only after its people first forget Him!

Yet, this anniversary year

brings both caution and hope. God has always used a faithful remnant to shape the course of nations. Revival does not start in capitals; it begins in churches, families and the quiet resolve of believers who choose righteousness. If America is to survive, it will be because God's people remember who He is and bow in reverence.

As we step into 2026, let this year be more than just a patriotic celebration. Let it be a time of spiritual renewal. Let us pray more fervently, live with greater integrity and witness with bold courage. Let us demonstrate gratitude in a culture that grumbles and shine as salt and light in a a

The founders gave us a Republic. In this 250th year, may we, by God's grace, prove ourselves worthy stewards of it—and steer our nation back to the only foundation that cannot be shaken.



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Crescendo! 2026: A Cultural & Culinary Extravaganza

Sinfonia Gulf Coast has announced the lineup for its highly anticipated annual fundraiser, Crescendo! A Cultural & Culinary Extravaganza, a three-day celebration blending world-class music, fine dining and community philanthropy. Set for Jan. 23, Feb. 27 and March 1, 2026, Crescendo! is expected to be a highlight of the Northwest Florida social season.

The festivities begin Friday, Jan. 23, at 11 a.m. with the Crescendo! Kick Off Lunch in the Juniper Ballroom at Hotel Effie in Miramar Beach. Dubbed Bubbles, Bourbon + More, the stylish afternoon offers high

takes place Sunday, March 1, at 3 p.m. in the Magnolia Ballroom at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. The afternoon extravaganza celebrates the culinary and cultural arts with premium wines and spirits, live and silent auctions, and an unforgettable musical performance.

Headlining the event is internationally renowned ensemble Pink Martini, performing live with the full Sinfonia Gulf Coast orchestra as part of the organization's 20th anniversary season. Known for its genre-blending sound that spans jazz, classical and vintage pop — often sung in more than 25 languages — Pink

said Sinfonia Music & Artistic Director Demetrius Fuller. "It's an intentional fusion of culture, community and philanthropy that directly supports our music education and outreach programs across Northwest Florida."

Proceeds from Crescendo! benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast's

extensive education and community engagement initiatives, including musicians in schools, free orchestra concerts, student transportation, the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra, partnerships with Florida State University, Carnegie Hall's Link Up concerts, the Paint the Music initiative and Arts in Medicine pro-

gramming with Sacred Heart Hospital.

Tickets are now on sale at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or by calling the box office at (850) 460-8800. Sponsorship opportunities are available by contacting Klara Mikolai at kmikolai@sinfoniagulfcoast.org.



tea-inspired vibes with lunch, champagne, wine and bourbon craft cocktails, a live DJ, and a curated fashion experience featuring Balmain. Guests will also enjoy an exclusive shopping experience in the Balmain Lounge. Tickets are \$175 per person and include lunch, beverages and gratuities. Early reservations are encouraged, as the event typically sells out.

Crescendo! weekend continues Friday, Feb. 27, at 6 p.m. with a series of intimate Vintner Dinners hosted in private homes and elegant venues throughout the Emerald Coast. These curated evenings pair acclaimed local and national chefs with prestigious wineries for a multi-course culinary experience. Participating vineyards include Opus One Winery, Promontory, Groth Estates, AXR, Reynolds Family Winery, Mondavi Sisters Wine and others, with additional culinary talent announcements forthcoming. Vintner Dinner tickets are \$500 per person and include all food, wine and gratuities.

The centerpiece of the weekend, the Crescendo! Main Event,



Martini has captivated audiences around the world. This marks the first time Sinfonia's orchestra has performed at Crescendo!.

Main Event guests will enjoy reserved table seating, hors d'oeuvres, an elegant seated late lunch and an all-inclusive afternoon of music, food and wine. Tickets are \$225 per person, with tables of 10 available.

"Crescendo! is unlike any other annual event we produce,"



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 Arts & Music

The Emerald Coast Music Alliance Festival 2026

By DEBBIE CARLONI

Our Passion for Music Education

“Music is a more potent instrument than any other for education,” Plato quoted. This belief is at the heart of The Emerald Coast Music Alliance (ECMA). Our mission is to foster a love for classical music and to share its significant educational and health benefits with students, seniors, individuals with developmental challenges, and the broader community of the Emerald Coast.

Festival 2026: A Week of World-Class Music

We are thrilled to announce our 10th annual Festival 2026, featuring accomplished artists who will perform from January

28th through February 8th at various locations. Performances will take place in Okaloosa-Walton County schools, senior centers, assisted living facilities, and agencies serving special needs populations, among others. Each festival includes 50-60 performances, and there is no cost to any participating school, agency, or organization.

Featured Artists

Under the guidance of our artistic director and concert pianist, Alon Goldstein, we have invited an outstanding roster of musicians for Festival 2026:

- The Cerus Saxophone Quartet
- Clarinetist Alexander Fiterstein
- Guitar Duo Ziggy & Miles



- Pianist Regina Tanujaya
- Free Community Concerts

In addition to performances at schools and community agencies, ECMA will present three Free Community Concerts featuring Alon Goldstein and our guest musicians:

- Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium on February 5th
- Crosspoint Church Niceville on February 6th

- Chautauqua Theatre Defuniak Springs (date TBA)

What People Are Saying

ECMA is grateful for the encouragement and support we receive through testimonials, which reinforce our mission to enrich lives through music.

Bob Hope Village

We had absolutely amazing performances from Emerald Coast Music Alliance Foundation!!!! They were absolutely amazing and our ballroom was FULL. Thank you for joining us! They are a very talented group of performers and heavily rely on donations.

Rocky Bayou Christian School

When I think that our students woke up in the piney woods of the Central Florida Panhandle, came to school this morning, and were able to hear a world-class musician spend an hour and a half demonstrating to them the beauty and passion of great music, I

am amazed that such a program exists and that such people exist to make this possible. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts and PLEASE come back!

Kenwood Elementary School

I am a VE / ESE teacher of 4th and 5th graders.

Join Us and Support Our Mission

We can't wait to perform for you this January – February!

Emerald Coast Music Alliance is a 501c3 organization that operates on the generous donations of businesses and individuals. Sponsorship opportunities for individual concerts are also available. To make a donation or for more information on how to become a sponsor, please visit <https://www.emeraldcoastmusic.org/donate.html>.

Please check our website <https://www.emeraldcoastmusic.org> for more information and updates on Free Concert times and how to reserve your seats. Or contact us by Email at info@emeraldcoastmusic.org.

SONGWRITERS

continued from page 9

val that he's most excited about. He said, "We're excited to add a new headline show on Friday, January 16th at Seaside Amphitheater, featuring 2026 Grammy Nominee Margo Price with her full band. She will feature songs from her catalog, including the just released deluxe album version of 'Hard Headed Woman.' We pride ourselves on supporting emerging artists on the verge of mainstream success. I highly encourage everyone to take this opportunity to see Nikki Lane and Paul McDonald & The Mourning Doves. Both have opening sets on the mainstage, as well as late night club sets at various 30A area venues, and both have critically acclaimed new albums and that are poised to break big, commercially, sooner than later."

only \$1,385. All of these ticket packages come in at quite the bargain considering you have the ability to see and hear so many remarkable songwriters across four days along the idyllic beach communities that have become a favorite vacation destination around the world.

For a full menu of performers, venues and showtimes, as well as grabbing those limited passes while you still can, visit: 30ASongwritersFestival.com and join us for the festival of music and fun!

Will Estell is a writer, editor, and multimedia consultant with more than 750 published features across travel, music, real estate, and automotive genres. He has conducted one-on-one interviews with a wide range of notable artists, including Kenny Chesney, Jimmy Buffett, Alan Jackson, Darius Rucker, Lyle Lovett, Amy Grant, Sara Evans, Brian Kelly, Styx, Eli Young Band, Drake White, and many others.

*Will Estell is the chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media and has co-founded 12 magazines from concept to launch, while also serving as editor for numerous additional titles. His newest media venture, *HIM Magazine*—a lifestyle publication for men—is slated to debut on newsstands nationwide in the third quarter of 2026.*

Originally from rural Mississippi, Estell is a father of three who now lives in Destin and Navarre Beach with his wife, WEAR ABC 3 news anchor Laura Hussey-Estell. He is a longtime regular contributor to Life Media's family of publications.

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News Around Town

FWB Snowbirds Celebrate 50 Years of Friendship and Community

The FWB Snowbirds are celebrating 50 years of friendship and fun in Fort Walton Beach in 2026, welcoming seasonal and full-time residents to join their active social club. This year's milestone event is a 50th Anniversary Valentine's Day Celebration set for Saturday, Feb. 14, at VFW Post 7674, 213 Carol Ave. NW, Fort Walton Beach, beginning at 7 p.m. The evening includes music by DJ Anthony Ryan, an open hors d'oeuvres buffet and bar, door prizes, giveaways and entertainment by the Emerald Coast Men's Barber shop Chorus.

2026 membership registration and activity sign-ups will be held from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesday, Jan. 12, and Tuesday, Feb. 3 and Feb. 10, at the Fort Walton Beach Recreation Center, 132 Jet Dr. Membership dues are \$15 per person. General meetings take place Jan. 15 and Feb. 12 at 10 a.m. at First Baptist Church on First St., with registration from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. and local vendors on site from 9 to 10 a.m.

Additional upcoming events

include a Dinner Social on Sunday, Jan. 17, at The Crab Trap, a Casino Trip on Feb. 18, and a Dinner Social on Feb. 22 at The Shack, along with weekly games, crafts and activities.

Upcoming Citizens' Police Academy

The Fort Walton Beach Police Department will host its next Citizens' Police Academy beginning Thursday, Feb. 5, 2026. This free, eight-week program offers residents an inside look at local law enforcement, designed to promote understanding, transparency and partnership in public safety. Participants will learn about police training, crime scene investigations, DUI procedures, community policing, patrol operations, K-9 units, traffic homicide investigations and more. Attendees are also encouraged to participate in a ride-along with an officer during a patrol shift. The academy meets from 6 to 8 p.m. each Thursday from Feb. 5 through March 26, 2026. It is open to those who live or work in Okaloosa County and are at least 18 years old. Space is limited. For more information or to apply, contact Master Po-

lice Officer Marcus Montgomery at mmontgomery@fwb.org.

Eglin AFB Awarded \$1.87 Billion Contract Through 2036

Eglin Air Force Base will remain a cornerstone of national defense and the Emerald Coast economy following the award of a nearly \$1.87 billion operations and maintenance contract by the U.S. Air Force. The competitively awarded contract was issued to Strategic Test Solutions LLC, a Huntsville, Alabama-based engineering services firm, to support the Eglin Test and Training Complex and major ground test facilities. The agreement extends through March 2036 and ensures continued maintenance of the infrastructure that supports Eglin's extensive weapons testing and evaluation mission.

Work will be performed at Eglin Air Force Base and across its vast test and training complex in Northwest Florida. Services include range operations, facility maintenance, engineering support and mission systems critical to sustaining advanced testing capabilities.

The contract was awarded by



EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE

96TH FORCE SUPPORT SQUADRON

the Air Force Test Center at Eglin following a competitive process that received three offers. Initial fiscal 2026 operations and maintenance funding was obligated at the time of award.

For the Fort Walton Beach area and surrounding communities, the long-term contract reinforces Eglin's role as one of the region's largest employers and a key driver of economic stability, while positioning the base to support future Air Force modernization efforts well into the next decade.

Stagecrafters Celebrates 53 Seasons

Stagecrafters will celebrate a year of memorable performances during its 2025 Season Showcase Celebration, formerly known as the Awards Banquet, on Saturday, Jan. 31, 2026, at

the Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium. The event honors highlights from Stagecrafters' 53rd season as the area's all-volunteer community theatre.

This year's celebration features a refreshed, community-friendly format. To keep costs down for members, Stagecrafters has eliminated the traditional banquet and opened the event to the public free of charge, with no tickets required. Doors open at 7 p.m., and attendees will also get an exclusive sneak peek at the theatre's 54th season of shows for 2026. Family, friends and theatre supporters are encouraged to attend and celebrate together.



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