

Mike Kohler – County Commission Candidate

Business Climate / Regulations Issues

- 1. Rate the regulatory climate for business in Escambia County. Is it Good/Fair/Bad? Explain your answer.**

I believe the regulatory climate in Escambia County is Fair to Good. One positive the county has experienced over the last decade is the Economic Development Ad Valorem Tax Exemption in which I hope the citizens vote to approve in November. It has brought an estimated 5,400 jobs and 1.2B in capital investment while forgoing 4.3M in property taxes. This would be a huge disincentive for economic growth if this was rejected in November. I intend to work with other county commissioners and local government agencies to create incentives to have controlled economic growth that the infrastructure can support.

- 2. Please provide any examples of how regulations have affected the life of county residents in a positive or negative way.**

I would like to look at the Warrington overlay regulation specific Sec 3.3.8 which doesn't allow for a convenience store within 2500 ft of another. I personally know a developer that would like to improve the property at Navy and Barrancas but can't do it because of the Warrington overlay policy. The front gate of the base to Barrancas has turned into blite. We need to seriously look at how the county can improve this corridor with incentives. I also would have not allowed the Dollar General on Gulf Beach Highway to be developed none of the residents wanted this business basically in a residential neighborhood.

- 3. Name the top 3 specific county ordinances/regulations you would like to see eliminated. Explain why they should be eliminated.**

I would like to change Sec 30-62 (d) to have one set of fines to mirror the higher fines (2). I would modify the ordinance to allow code enforcement to move certain cases to the county judge rather than go to the special magistrate. Many neighborhoods have houses that are in noncompliance with code and are caught in months to years of a run around because of this process.

I already mentioned above I would modify the Warrington overlay policy.

I would remove feeding cats and dogs outside police Sec 10-27. Is this really a big problem? It seems like government overreach.

Operations / Infrastructure Issues

- 4. Do you see any overlap or duplication of services between the county and the city? If so, what services, and how could these services be consolidated?**

I am in favor of a chartered government that would decrease duplication of services and consolidate government resources to maximize effectiveness across the county. Do we really need seven city council members which three of the county commissioners' districts also include some parts of the city limits? It is not only not necessary but inefficient governance. Second, when you look at the size of the City of Pensacola related to the county it has a very small imprint of around 54K residents. The county averages around 321K residents. Any major business looking to expand into Pensacola would look at the city as a small market. The town of Century should come under Escambia County. They can't even field enough candidates to apply for public service.

5. Homelessness and panhandling continue to be a significant problem in Escambia County. What are your solutions to this pressing problem that impacts the business community?

The homelessness and panhandling are becoming a huge problem and now it is creeping to places all over the county and effecting law abiding tax paying citizens lives every day. I support as a Registered Nurse a compassionate structured support to these individuals, but panhandling should be illegal, signs should be placed to encourage citizens not to give money on the streets like Columbia, SC. The local support agencies for these individuals Re-Entry Program and Pathways to change are doing great things but when no other counties between Escambia and Leon have these services it puts a much greater burden on Escambia County. The Florida Legislature should take this issue on as well as the BOCC to begin solving this problem. Finally, if the homelessness numbers are growing rather than shrinking the homeless task force needs to reassess their goals. The working capable homeless should be required to work if provided shelter and food. This problem is going to require real leadership and folks that want to change the exponential crisis that is growing in the County.

6. Do you believe the county allocates sufficient resources for infrastructure projects? How would you prioritize these projects and fund them?

The county budget at around 550M dollars allows for very limited infrastructure projects which compete with daily operations to keep the county running. The short and simple answer is there is not enough money to allocate for so many long-term projects. If you look at storm water drainage, there has been some funds allocated but this is a situation that will require years to solve unless we get additional state dollars. Septic to sewer is another project I support but the lack of appropriate planning and change in environmental awareness of septic next to the waterways has literally put us years behind other states and communities. The very first and easy solution is to put all Commissioners discretionary funds back into the general fund and like every other board require the Commissioners to rack and stack county priorities based on a priority analysis.

7. What is your opinion of the beach congestion plans that have been proposed? What is your vision for solving this problem?

I thought when they re-routed the traffic through Casino Beach that was a great start to move some of the congestion. The problem is there is no were really to expand unless you go up. I would be in favor of a parking garage, but our beach is seasonal, and it would not always be needed or utilized. We would need to see if it is a viable option to resource. The Pensacola Ferry Service could help but is currently limited due to damages at Quietwater Beach and is also only needed seasonally. The trolley system on the beach does appear to be help some congestion and adds a unique feature to the Beach. In short, unless the BOCC wanted to limit the number of individuals on the island congestion will at times continue to be an issue. I do not currently support any limitation of access to Pensacola Beach. The Beach should be open for relaxation and business.

8. A glaring need in our community is for a facility that has adequate meeting space for conventions and events. What is your position on such a facility?

Any vibrant community has an adequate size convention center to host concerts and events. The Pensacola Bay Center is outdated and needs to be replaced with a new facility that would continue to expand the energy currently growing in downtown. I chaired the Pensacola Health Symposium from 1999-2001 with representatives from all the local hospitals. The number one reason it couldn't grow to a major event with CEUs' for Health Care providers was because of this issue.

9. What would your Five Year Plan for Escambia County look like?

My five-year plan would include a goal of drastically decreasing homelessness, taking back our streets, and removing the blite in many areas of the county. I will immediately begin working with FDOT to expand Gulf Beach- Sorrento Road. I intend to start tackling the storm water drainage issue as well as moving from septic to sewer before I die. I think we need to look at ECAT routes to assure we are getting the best possible outcomes both for the citizens that need this resource and the taxpayer to optimize functionality and fiscal responsibility. I would like to see term limits for the Board of County Commissioners and School Board similar to what Governor DeSantis signed into law on June 25, 2022 for ECUA.

Economic Development Issues

10. What role should county government take in attracting new businesses to the area? What types of jobs would you like to see growing in Escambia County? Be specific.

For years the three main industries in Pensacola were military, health care and tourism. We need to preserve all of these but in recent years the expansion of Navy Federal Credit Union was a great beginning of attracting good paying jobs, but we also have learned the stressors of adding thousands of new jobs to the roads, schools, and continued housing shortage. My number one immediate thing that can help sustain growth is the passing of the Economic Development Ad Valorem Tax Exemption this November. The types of jobs I would like to see are to maintain federal and state jobs, technical jobs, health care, tourism, and service industry growth, potentially a cruise ship, and more local small businesses.

11. What is your vision for the various commerce parks or potential sites throughout Escambia County?

The commerce parks and technology parks need to be looked at for functionality and actual effectiveness of space. The technology park next to the Pensacola Bay center has been vacant for years. The county needs to have a sunset ordinance that if there is no development the property needs to be reviewed for potential other uses or be sold to the private sector for development.

12. What should the county do with excess properties that it owns? Be specific.

Excess properties that are not utilized should be either planned to develop for citizen or county needs or sold to individuals in the private sector for a fair price that is beneficial to both the county and buyer.

13. Tourism is an integral part of Escambia County's economy. In what ways can the county commission support tourism in Escambia County? Be specific.

The Tourism Development Tax should be maintained it added over 3M dollars from the year before to the county coffers. The BOCC should support the marketing of visit Pensacola and encourage events that bring visitors both local and out of area travelers together. I am on SERTOMA which has done the Fireworks for years which has brought thousands together for a beautiful July 4th celebration. Sadly, I believe this year will be the last year. I loved the Pelican drop on New Year's Eve, but we lost that after a few years. Events help define communities and bring individuals in that support local business. I have put on several events over the years in Pensacola from the Health Symposium, Rock N Fly Half Marathon, Navy Ball Run, supported my wife in the Christmas Dash for years that targeted our youth to be active which happened prior to the Christmas Parade. I will be as supporter of tourism and events in Escambia County.

14. What are the top transportation projects needed to sustain the growth that we are experiencing in Escambia County?

1. Expansion of Gulf Beach - Sorrento Road to Theo Baars Bridge. It is needed not just for traffic flow but EMS transportation to the hospitals.
2. Blue Angel should also be expanded for the same reason as well as for a hurricane evacuation route.