

## **Robert Bender – 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.**

Good. There is a balance between government oversight and letting businesses operate freely. The County has remained and is open for business, allowing businesses to continue operating instead of forcing them to shut down and losing jobs due to regulations. Businesses want a functioning government and not red tape. They plan around the time line we give them to review plans and documents, and expect us to be able to meet those expectations. We should help them “get to yes” instead of just saying it can’t be done. We should offer suggestions or solutions that can help someone through the process.

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

Code Enforcement allows us to help bring a property into compliance. They are not meant to be weaponized, but instead assist and lead someone to improve a situation that is most likely having a negative impact on the neighbors. One such example is the old motel on Plantation Road adjacent to I-110 we were able to tear down after going through the process. It was the first thing you saw getting onto I-110 and the last thing you saw leaving town. It had broken windows, was constantly being broken into, was a nuisance issue for the Sheriff’s Department, the pool was a safety issue, and the neighbors were constantly complaining. Being able to have the tools to address this rundown property with an absent owner immediately improved a situation for residential and commercial neighbors.

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

Good governance starts with good policy. I have been an active and engaged commissioner these past 4 years, and would have worked to eliminate or change ordinances if I thought that was appropriate. More than anything, people want to see our current ordinances enforced. They make decisions and have expectations based on ordinances being followed, and are frustrated and disappointed if they aren’t enforced. Additionally, I spent the last few months successfully lobbying against SB620, which Governor DeSantis recently vetoed, and other similar bills that would have restricted or impacted local government’s ability to enact ordinances wanted by citizens.

### **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?**

With nearly 60% of District 4 residents being City of Pensacola residents, having a good working relationship with the Mayor and City Council is important. We have consolidated a number of departments including EMS, library services, mosquito control, animal control, and ECAT. During these past four years, I have tried to be as helpful as possible when contacted about issues under the City's purview, following up until the issue is resolved, and not just saying the person needs to contact the City. Florida has 411 incorporated municipalities, but only 67 counties. If there wasn't a desire to have some overlap or duplication between county and city services, we would see municipalities dissolve.

**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?**

Having studied the issue and talked with homeless advocates, I see a distinction between the two. The County currently has \$4M in ARPA funds to be used to address homelessness. We want to use this one-time money as seed funding to help establish a program that can help those who are homeless, instead of wasting it on short-term options that aren't sustainable long-term. A good model we could implement is similar to Tallahassee's Kearney Center, which I have toured, and provides immediate shelter, offers various program assistance to those in need, and is operated by a local non-profit. Medical services are provided as well as services from various organizations which help obtain ID, collect social security or veteran benefits, job interviews/placement, and attempts to move individuals into more stable housing. Regarding panhandling, I agree with the better way to give campaign, encouraging donations to the organizations that help provide services to homelessness and those in need.

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

Public Safety and infrastructure are my two top priorities. Hurricane Sally was a test to the projects completed after the 2012 and 2014 floods, but also brought to light areas where we could still improve. One project that came to light is currently nearing completion between Johnson Avenue and Olive Road that will increase the capacity of the drainage system, and greatly reduce the likelihood of homes that have flooded multiple times from flooding again. Instead of applying for a federal grant to buy certain properties, move residents from their homes, and creating vacant properties forever in established neighborhoods, I focused on investing in a project to fix the problem. The grant process to acquire those homes would still be playing out, but now these neighborhoods have an improved system that will help all of them. Another project where we have completed phase I and are in design for phase II, was transforming the Ellison Industrial Pit into a retention pond, and providing additional outfall through a pipe to prevent the flooding of surrounding homes when the pit would get full. I focused on keeping the cost down by using county resources to excavate and slope the pond, and the finished pond has a much larger capacity than before. The phase II installation of the pipe is in design, and will be installed when crews are repairing Hurricane Sally damage, saving the County money by combining the two projects. We are also completing a joint project with the City of Pensacola along Burgess Road adding curb, gutters, and sidewalks between Davis and Lanier. This project had been planned for years, but working jointly with the City, we will soon

be able to check this off the list as a completed project. We are currently studying Olive Road west of Davis Highway, where there is a gap in the center turn lane, need for drainage, sidewalks, and increased capacity to turn right onto Davis which will reduce the congestion and backup in the mornings. Although I have highlighted a few projects we are nearing completion on or designing, Escambia County does not have the local funds to fund every project. By applying for various federal grants, we were able to fund the first two projects mentioned above, while county Local Option Sales Tax dollars will primarily fund the last two. The price for projects like these have skyrocketed the last two years with the increase in gas prices, labor, and materials, but they have remained a priority to me, and we have been able to get them done. We have a number of roads scheduled to be resurfaced in the Northpointe and Ferry Pass neighborhoods this year. I am also continuing to add sidewalks and street lights to areas that need them. I have demonstrated the ability to get funding for these projects, but the biggest need on the horizon is the replacement of the Bob Sikes Bridge. The \$5M rehabilitation completed in 2021 will extend the service life of the bridge to at least 2040. I have been protective of the spending of the toll money to start a reserve for the replacement bridge, and have been working with State and Federal officials on ways they can help. When it comes time to replace the bridge, it will be one of the largest infrastructure projects Escambia County has ever done.

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

The traffic on Pensacola Beach has been greatly improved from where it was four years ago when I took office. Our busiest days have 10% more traffic, and the time it takes to get onto the beach has been reduced by over 50%. I was able to accomplish this because of a number of low-cost, practical, quick projects. These projects include removing the need for 85+% of the traffic having to merge into one lane after coming off Highway 98, and having the much smaller percentage of traffic coming from the flyover merge; allowing remote real-time monitoring and adjustment of the traffic signal on the busiest days of the week (the weekends); removing congestion and backup at the toll plaza; resurfacing and redesigning the southbound lanes to add 800 feet of right turn lane for the 30% of the traffic heading to Ft Pickens Road; adding a protected right turn out of the Casino Beach Parking lot; adding protected bike lanes across the Bob Sikes Bridge to encourage walking and biking to get across the bridge; completing design and construction of the access road connecting the Grand Marlin and Quietwater areas; adding U-turns resulting in safer crossings and less backups; and installing cameras at the toll plaza so beach goers and residents could visually see real-time traffic conditions. My focus has been to keep traffic from backing up onto Highway 98, and not having residents feel they can't leave the island on the weekends. Now that traffic getting onto the beach has been improved, I have also been focusing on getting traffic off the island in the afternoons and evenings. The plan to construct two roundabouts was reviewed by an expert, who has designed hundreds of roundabouts around the country. He determined they were too small, would have to be redesigned to implement "hot right" lanes, and completely change the atmosphere as you approached the core. After seeing the success of the above mentioned projects, I believe it to be much more beneficial to allocate a portion of the funding earmarked for the roundabouts to a parking garage. When the current parking lots get full, this is usually when congestion and traffic start to build. This would have minimal impact during construction to visitors and businesses, and be the first major parking improvement in decades. We also implemented a pilot park and

ride shuttle for employees for the 4th of July and Blue Angels weekends this year to make it easier for them to find parking before their shifts, and allow for more parking for beach visitors. I look forward to studying the success of this program once it is complete and determining what we can implement in the future.

**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?**

I recognize and support the need for such a facility, but it will mostly likely require a public/private partnership and coordination with the City of Pensacola. We have a number of successful events that could grow with a new venue, in addition to the new business it will bring. The loss of the New World Landing from Hurricane Sally left an added void for smaller events; much like the Bayfront Auditorium did when we lost it in 2004. I believe an appropriate solution for our area would be a boutique conference facility that offers meeting and event space for events good for our size, not a large convention facility like Orlando or New Orleans. Having this type of facility would also help with tourism, especially during the shoulder season.

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

Public safety and infrastructure will remain a priority for me, including completing the training center for the fire department. I look forward to continuing to focus on Economic Development initiatives we are currently pursuing, which will diversify our industries, and create new opportunities for our work force. I want to add to the quality of life amenities similar to the playground and workout equipment we recently installed in Ferry Pass, and focus on adding the first community center in the unincorporated area of District 4. Work to get the Pensacola Perdido Bay Estuary Program recognized as a National Estuary Program and improve our water quality by converting more residents and commercial properties from septic to sewer. Finally, keep taxes low by offsetting the additional costs of products and services by the growth we will have.

## **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.**

I support free market principles, and the County should use the tools granted and allowed to attract new businesses. I see Economic Development being similar to research and development for companies – if you do not invest, you do not innovate, and the likelihood of having success diminishes. As Commissioner, I have met with a number of businesses looking to move to Escambia County. They want to see a functioning government, one that doesn't have regulations that burden them or red tape to hold them up. Although we have incentives and Triumph money we can use help make the investment cost of new/upgraded facilities more favorable to come here, the best thing we can do is have programs to train employees and provide a quality work force, having shovel ready sites, and fostering an environment where businesses want to come here because of how great the community is, not just monetary incentives. As far as jobs, we should leverage our strengths in workforce development by targeting industries with programs

we already have in place. Cyber, aerospace, robotics/avionics, and high-end manufacturing are a few.

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

As Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners last year, I was able to bring a plan forward on OLF8 that addressed the needs of the Beulah residents, and provided a structured plan for commerce. The RFP for development of a portion of the site is currently out for bid, and I look forward to that property starting to be developed. We continue to move forward with the Beulah I-10 interchange, which will be a great addition for someone looking to develop other parcels. We are working with a local company for expansion of their operations which would require a majority of the Mid-town commerce park. We are also working on developing the outparcels to the West and South of the main site. The Bluffs has received funding the past two years from the legislature to help move it toward shovel ready. Due to our proximity, we can leverage the success of regional growth to be a part of their supply chain.

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

The County should not be in the business of owning property without a specific use in mind (future development, conservation/preservation, providing a buffer for NAS Pensacola). Excess properties should be sold to allow those pieces of property to generate tax revenue. Even donating them to affordable housing opportunities could be a win-win for the community and get them on the tax roll.

**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.**

Tourism is our number one industry in Escambia County. Aside from the direct jobs it creates in hotels, rental management companies, restaurants, and excursions/activities, many more dollars are also generated from the construction and maintenance of the facilities. The beaches are the major attraction, but visitors want a full experience. Having a community where people want to work, play, and live is one way to provide that experience. We already have many qualities that separate us from competing sites near and far. Given today's gas prices, being in NW Florida and only one tank away from our target market can be a competitive advantage. I have attended market research studies where the quality of service, hospitality, and relaxed atmosphere impress visitors so much that they want to come back. This past year, I was able to reinvest some of the Tourist Development Tax money into projects on Pensacola Beach to provide a better experience for everyone visiting the beach, including the repainting of the iconic water tower. We have also added a recurring reserve for beach renourishment. Being able to work with community partners led to one of the best successes for 2021. Celebrating their 75th Anniversary during the pandemic, the Blue Angels risked having to cancel their homecoming and final show of the year. Working with the SRIA and Visit Pensacola, I was able to move the show to Pensacola Beach, saving the many reservations already booked by alumni coming to celebrate this historic milestone. It also gave the businesses who had weathered COVID and the bridge closure, a much needed boost in an otherwise slow period.

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

As the current Chair of the Florida-Alabama TPO, I am helping prioritize many of these projects for Escambia County, which are already being worked on in different phases. The Beulah interchange is a must due to the continued growth and the opportunity it would create for easy access to OLF8 and a quicker route to the County Landfill. FDOT is currently working on adding additional lanes on I-10, starting at the state line. Various county bridges need to be replaced, including the Quintette Road Bridge linking Escambia County to Santa Rosa County. Although the focus for new and widening of roads is in other districts, specifically in Districts 1 and 5 where the majority of growth is occurring, implementation of a county-wide traffic operation center will allow us to use technology to make the current roads more efficient. Plans are currently being designed for a new facility located behind Public Safety off W Street.