

LOCAL & STATE

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Officials report on State of the County



Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners Vice Chairman Graham Fountain presents an update during the League of Women Voters of Okaloosa County's State of the County report on Saturday. (KELLY HUMPHREY/DAILYNEWS)

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Lifeguards and schools and infrastructure were just a few of the topics on the minds of citizens on Saturday at the League of Women Voters' 18th annual State of the County Report.

Okaloosa County Clerk of Courts J.D. Peacock, School Board Chairman Lamar White and Board of County Commissioners Vice Chairman Graham Fountain took part in the panel at the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, with each offering an update on the status of their respective offices.

Not surprisingly, each speaker reported that the state of the county is strong.

"The good news about our county government is that it is in very good shape," Fountain told the attendees. "I can say it's better than most

counties in the state. I was at an FAC (Florida Association of Counties) meeting not long ago, and we had 69 new county commissioners there. Several of the counties were our same size, and their general millage rate was between 9 and 10 mills. When I told them that our rate was under 4 mills, they couldn't believe it. They said, 'How do you all function?'"

Peacock, who was elected in 2014, pointed to reorganization in his office that he said resulted in more efficient and less costly operations.

"Due to state budget cuts, we've lost 16 of the 75 people who are responsible for the operation of our courts system," he said. "Our workload hasn't decreased, but we've tried to find ways to use software and other tools to be more efficient. We've gone from dealing with stacks of paper to an almost paperless system in our courts now."

During his presentation,

White touted some of the school district's accomplishments over the past year, including being rated as an "A" district by the state and being named one of the top three highest academically performing school districts in Florida.

"There are many reasons for the citizens of Okaloosa County to be proud of their public school system," White said.

During the question and answer period, both White and Fountain responded to questions about the possibility of a voter referendum on an optional sales tax to help fund school maintenance and construction as well as county infrastructure projects.

"It would cost the county around \$100,000 to put the referendum on the ballot," Fountain said. "But I ran on the idea of transferring some of our tax burden from ad valorem (property taxes) to something that would capture the tour-

ist and other dollars. I'd like to see some polling to see if the majority of people are in favor of a referendum."

For his part, White said any referendum calling for a sales tax would have to originate with citizens in order to be successful.

"It is critically important that it come from the outside," White said.

"We could vote to spend your money to put a referendum on the ballot, but I would hate to do that if there isn't enough support to pass it. I'm not telling you how I would vote, but I can say this. I've been in the schools, and there are real, necessary needs where a half-cent sales tax's revenues could be put to good use."