



**Agenda  
Special Meeting  
of the Mary Esther City Council  
January 6, 2026 - 6:00 PM**

195 Christobal Road – North, Mary Esther, FL 32569

1. **INVOCATION**
2. **CALL TO ORDER**
3. **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**
4. **ROLL CALL**
5. **APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA**
6. **NEW BUSINESS**
  - 6.1. **Discussion: Proposed Closure of Mary Esther Elementary School**
7. **ADJOURN**

**\*\*\*\*\* PLEASE TURN OFF OR SILENCE ALL CELL PHONES \*\*\*\*\***

## WATCHING AND PARTICIPATION

**To watch the meetings virtually, citizens may log onto the city's website ([www.cityofmaryesther.com](http://www.cityofmaryesther.com)), click the "Public Meetings" section, and select the meeting they would like to watch.**

Any citizen who would like to comment on non-agenda items must submit a service request through the city's website, call customer service at (850) 243-3566, or fill out a form at city hall. A form must be completed by 12 pm one week before the day of the meeting. Filling out a form does not guarantee you will be added to the agenda. If a citizen opts to participate virtually, an email will be sent with the Zoom registration link.

### **NOTES:**

- 1) *Adjournment with continuation on the following day at 6:00 PM may be called if the meeting proceeds past 10 PM.*
- 2) *The City does not keep verbatim minutes as a matter of record. If a person decides to appeal any decision made by the Mary Esther City Council with respect to any matter considered at this meeting, he or she will need a record of the proceedings, and that, for such purpose, he or she may need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which record includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based. See Florida Statute 286.0105*
- 3) *Any invocation that may be offered before the official start of the Council meeting shall be the voluntary offering of a private citizen, to and for the benefit of the Council. The views or beliefs expressed by the invocation speaker have not been previously reviewed or approved by the Council, and the Council is not allowed by law to endorse the religious beliefs or views of this or any other speaker.*

# AGENDA ITEM

Agenda Item 6.1.

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**TO:** Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

**FROM:** Jared Cobb, City Manager

**DATE:** January 6, 2026

**SUBJECT:** Discussion: Proposed Closure of Mary Esther Elementary School

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## **BACKGROUND:**

The Okaloosa County School District has proposed closing Mary Esther Elementary School. This school has served our community for 60 years, having opened in 1965. Enrollment is currently approximately 400 students, down from approximately 600 in 2018.

## **Timeline of Proposed Actions**

- **December 2025:** School District officials and City staff met to discuss the closure proposal.
- **January 12, 2026:** The School Board is scheduled to vote on whether to authorize a public hearing.
- **February 23, 2026:** If authorized, a formal public hearing will be held.
- **Fall 2026:** If closed, the school would likely not reopen for the new school year.

## **DISCUSSION:**

The City's **2023 Vision Plan** and recently adopted **2025 Comprehensive Plan** highlight the school's importance to city planning goals. These plans were informed by a community survey (279 participants) and stakeholder focus groups. Notably, the main public workshop for the Vision Plan was held at Mary Esther Elementary.

## **Planning and Community Context**

- **City Identity:** Residents identified "lack of identity" as the City's top challenge (Vision Plan, p. 5). The Vision Plan identifies the school as a primary "neighborhood anchor" (Vision Plan, p. 8).
- **Small-Town Feel:** The 2025 Comprehensive Plan emphasizes that neighborhood schools are essential to maintaining this character and attracting families (Comp Plan, Policy 1.1.4).
- **City Priorities:** Residents ranked school safety and access as the second-highest priority for the entire City (Vision Plan, p. 12).
- **Unique Status:** With a population of approximately 4,500, Mary Esther would become

the only City in Okaloosa County without a public school within its incorporated limits.

### **Enrollment and Financial Context**

- **Enrollment Comparison:** While 400 students is smaller than the state average, the FLDOE Membership Report from 2024–2025 indicates that over 250 elementary schools in Florida successfully operate with enrollments between 300 and 450 students.
- **Taxpayer Contribution:** Residents and businesses in Mary Esther contribute significantly to the District through property taxes and the voter-approved school sales tax.

### **Partnership Approach**

As an incorporated city, Mary Esther has a unique capacity to offer alternatives to support the school:

- **Housing Policy:** The City can use zoning to encourage family-oriented housing to boost enrollment (Comp Plan, Objective 5).
- **Infrastructure:** The City's plans include building a new entrance road from Hollywood Boulevard to improve student safety (Vision Plan, p. 24).

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

While a final dollar amount is difficult to quantify, the closure creates two concerns:

1. **Protection of Property Values:** Neighborhood schools are a top driver for home prices. Closing the school removes this "neighborhood amenity," which could negatively impact property values.
2. **The Future of the Site (Redevelopment):** If the school closes, the 5+ acre site would be slated for a different use. A transition to private ownership could potentially add the property to the City's tax rolls through redevelopment. However, the City should coordinate closely with the School District to ensure any new use aligns with surrounding neighborhoods and does not result in a long-term vacant facility.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

No staff recommendation is provided. This is a policy decision for the Council. Staff requests Council direction on how to proceed, which may include one of the following options:

1. **Direct Partnership to Keep the School Open.** Request a joint meeting with the School Board to discuss options to keep the school open, including the use of City housing and infrastructure tools.
2. **Direct Advocacy to Keep the School Open.** Support a City-wide effort to help parents and residents share their voices with the School Board to prevent the closure.
3. **Plan for Transition.** Coordinate with the District to ensure the existing site is used for

community benefit if the school closes.

**ATTACHMENT(S):**