



**MINUTES
SPECIAL MEETING
of THE MARY ESTHER CITY COUNCIL
January 6, 2026 - 6:00 PM**

195 Christobal Road – North, Mary Esther, FL 32569

CITY COUNCIL PRESENT

Chris Stein, Mayor
April Sutton, Councilmember (Virtually)
Susan Coxwell, Councilmember

Bernie Oder, Mayor Pro Tem
Larry Carter, Councilmember
Richard Lawson, Councilmember

CITY STAFF PRESENT

Jared Cobb, City Manager
Hayward Dykes, City Attorney
Dillon Morris, City Clerk

OTHERS PRESENT

Chad Rewis, OSCO Captain

1. INVOCATION

No invocation given.

2. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Stein at 6:00 p.m.

3. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Mayor Stein led the Pledge of Allegiance.

4. ROLL CALL

The City Clerk called the roll as reflected above. Mayor Stein asked for a motion for Councilmember Sutton to participate virtually. Councilmember Coxwell initiated the motion, seconded by Councilmember Carter. The motion passed unanimously.

RESULT:	PASSED (4-0)
MOVER:	Councilmember Susan Coxwell
SECOND:	Councilmember Larry Carter
AYES:	Larry Carter, Bernie Oder, Richard Lawson, Susan Coxwell
NAYS:	None

5. APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

Mayor Stein asked if the council wished to make any changes to the agenda. Hearing none, Mayor Stein asked for a motion to approve the agenda as presented. Councilmember Coxwell initiated the motion, seconded by Councilmember Lawson. The motion passed unanimously.

RESULT:	PASSED (5-0)
MOVER:	Councilmember Susan Coxwell
SECOND:	Councilmember Richard Lawson
AYES:	Larry Carter, Bernie Oder, April Sutton, Richard Lawson, Susan Coxwell
NAYS:	None

6. NEW BUSINESS

6.1. Discussion: Proposed Closure of Mary Esther Elementary School

City Manager Cobb discussed the background of the proposed closure of Mary Esther Elementary School, including the school's history, current enrollment, the school board decision timeline, the city's plan, key considerations, and options (PowerPoint attached). The mayor and council had a discussion involving having a representative at the next regular council meeting, having the mayor and city manager attend the school board meeting on January 12th, Mayor Stein attending the school when it first opened, enrollment numbers at other schools, funding at other schools in Okaloosa county schools, and what happens to the property assuming it is sold immediately. City Attorney Dykes said a lot depends on future meetings, zoning, the comprehensive plan, and the local planning agency. Council discussed further the declining numbers of the school, issues with the problem coming up now versus previously, changes in the county over the years, policy changes, changes in county growth, changes in demographics, housing prices, the school district raising the millage rate, and the lack of being informed of the problem.

Kelly Carlstrom, 221 Annabelle Dr, spoke about her history with the school, declining enrollment, Hurlburt zoning, and school attendance, and said there should be other options for the school. Councilmember Oder asked who decided the zoning for Hurlburt, to which Ms. Carlstrom did not have the answer. The council discussed this topic.

Margaret McLemore, Brian Cir, discussed her daughter attending Mary Esther Elementary, the importance in the community, the half-cent sales tax, the school's rating, and the current zoning. Council discussed the school's reputation, its rating, and the upward trajectory of the rating.

Adam Thompson, 664 Randall Roberts Rd, discussed the military standpoint, the role of education in military readiness, and the base as a stakeholder in these conversations.

Danielle Parker, 220 Destin Dr, discussed teaching at the school, the layoff number versus the number of teacher openings, and class sizes increasing if the school closes.

Nicole Potter, 1751 Hunt Club St, discussed having a child attend the school, and read the petition she made to save the school.

The mayor and council discussed the current school board representative for Mary Esther being Parker Destin.


City Attorney Dykes instructed City Clerk Morris to post that multiple councilmembers were in attendance at the school board meeting for Sunshine Law purposes.

7. ADJOURN

The council meeting adjourned at 6:49 p.m.

Minutes approved at the meeting.

1/20/2026


Dillon Morris, City Clerk



CITY COUNCIL DISCUSSION

Mary Esther Elementary School

Proposed Closure & Community Impact

January 6, 2026

Background & Timeline

KEY FACTS

Opened in 1965 — serving Mary Esther for 60 years

Current enrollment: ~400 students

Down from ~600 in 2018

CONTEXT

Over 250 Florida elementary schools successfully operate with enrollments between 300–450 students (FLDOE 2024–25)

Decision Timeline

December 5, 2025

School District and City staff met to discuss proposal

January 12, 2026

School Board vote on authorizing public hearing

February 23, 2026

Formal public hearing (if authorized)

August 2026

Potential closure effective date

What Our Plans Say

Findings from the 2023 Vision Plan & 2025 Comprehensive Plan

CITY IDENTITY

Residents identified "lack of identity" as the City's top challenge. The school is identified as a primary neighborhood anchor.

Vision Plan, pp. 5, 8

COMMUNITY PRIORITY

School safety and access ranked as the second-highest priority for the entire City in resident surveys.

Vision Plan, p. 12

SMALL-TOWN CHARACTER

Neighborhood schools are essential to maintaining community character and attracting families.

Comp Plan, Policy 1.1.4

UNIQUE STATUS

If closed, Mary Esther would become the only city in Okaloosa County without a public school within its incorporated limits.

Based on community survey (279 participants) and stakeholder focus groups

Key Considerations



Property Values

Neighborhood schools are a top driver for home prices. Closure removes a key neighborhood amenity.



Site Redevelopment

The 10-acre buildable site could be repurposed. Private redevelopment would add property to tax rolls, but coordination needed to align with neighborhood character.

CITY TOOLS AVAILABLE

Housing Policy — Zoning to encourage family-oriented housing and boost enrollment

Infrastructure — New entrance road from Hollywood Blvd planned to improve student safety

TAXPAYER CONTEXT

Mary Esther residents and businesses contribute approximately \$2.7M to the District through property taxes and \$500K in voter-approved school sales tax.

Options for Council Direction

1

Direct Partnership

Request a joint meeting with the School Board to discuss options to keep the school open, including use of City housing and infrastructure tools.

2

Direct Advocacy

Support a City-wide effort to help parents and residents share their voices with the School Board to keep the school open, including authorizing the Mayor or City Manager to speak at future School Board meetings.

3

Plan for Transition

Coordinate with the District to ensure the existing site is used for community benefit if the school closes.

This is a policy decision for Council. Staff requests direction on how to proceed.



Enrollment Trends and Impact Analysis Information

South End Okaloosa Area

DECLINING ENROLLMENT



Declining enrollment across the state of Florida is real and has been consistent over the last five years and 45 of the 67 school districts are declining and specifically to our county we have talked about:

- **The availability of affordable housing within our sectors.**
- **The national and local birth and fertility rates are down.**
- **More school choice options for families such as:**
 - **State Educational Scholarships**
 - **Growing number of charter**
 - **Growing number of private schools**



SUMMARY ENROLLMENT DATA

2014-15 THROUGH 2025-26 SCHOOL YEARS

SOUTH END OKALOOSA AREA SCHOOLS (not Destin) 11-YEAR GROWTH

ELEMENTARY ENROLLMENT DECREASED 19.3%

- FROM 4,861 TO 3,923 STUDENTS (1.8% PER YEAR)

MIDDLE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT DECREASE 4.4%

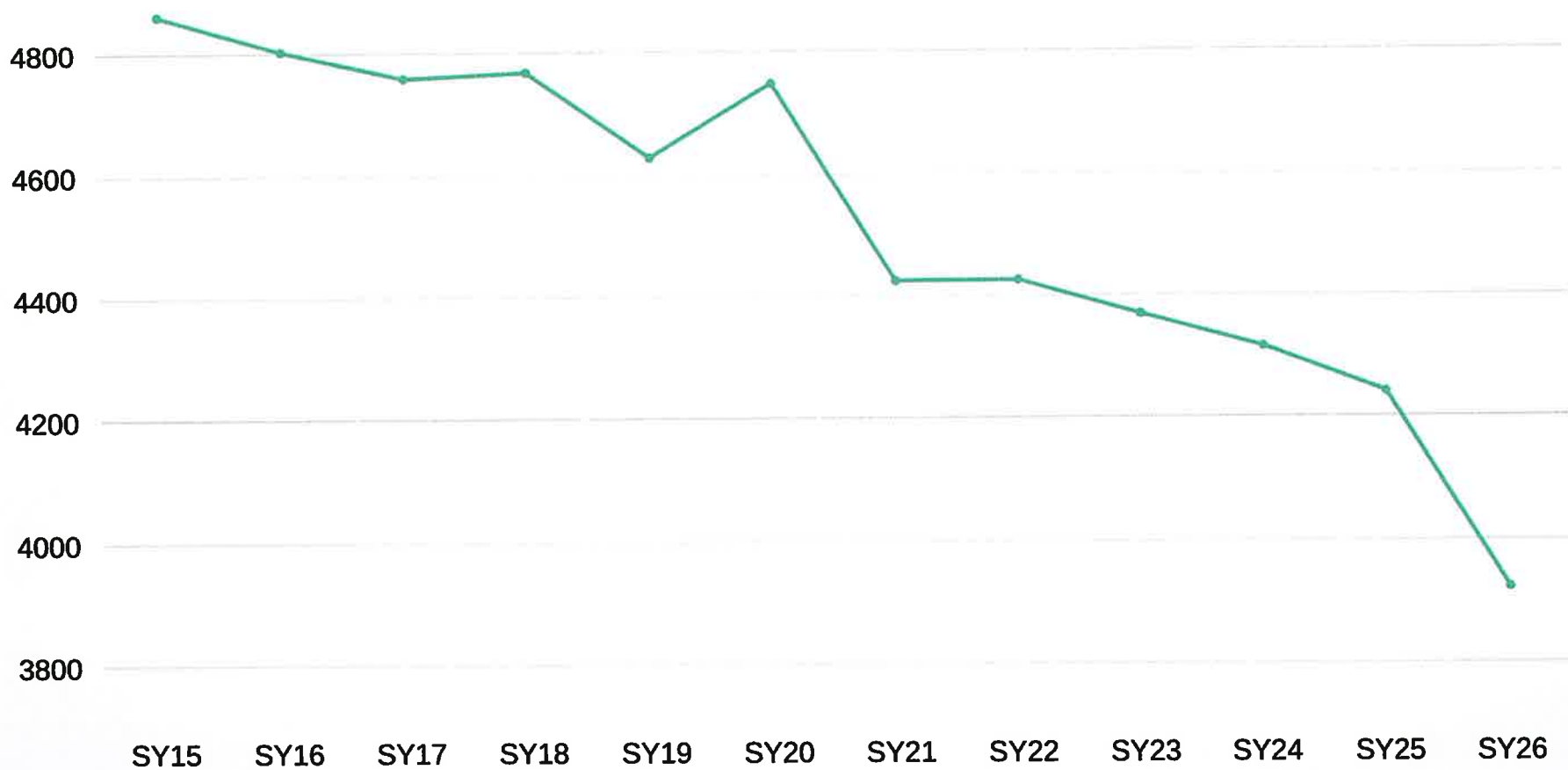
- FROM 1,928 TO 1,843 STUDENTS (0.4% PER YEAR)

HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT DECREASED 0.9%

- FROM 3,283 TO 3,253 STUDENTS (0.08% PER YEAR)

2015-2026 Total Enrollment – South Elementary

● Elementary-FWB Area



ENROLLMENT



K-5 Forecast

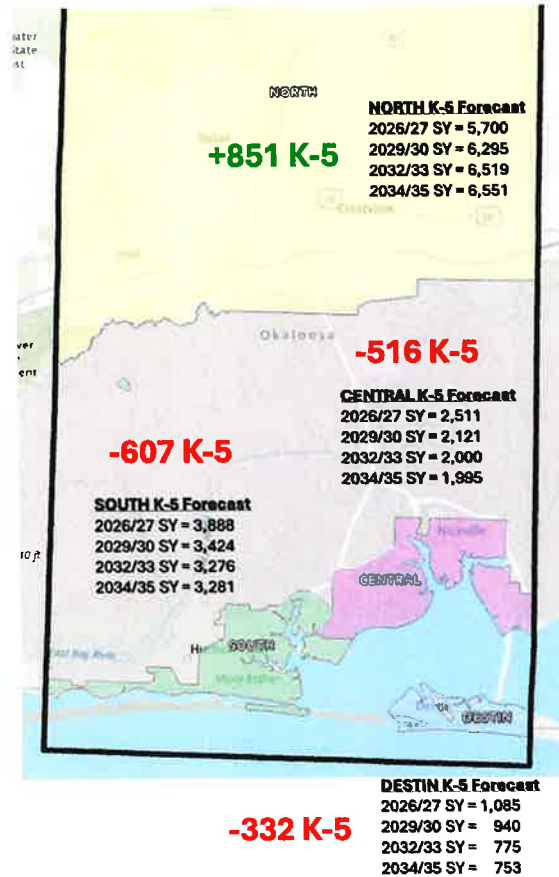
October 2026 thru October 2034
(after Pineview PK-8 opens)

Overall

AN OVERALL NET **LOSS**
OF **604 K-5** STUDENTS
DISTRICT-WIDE DURING
THAT TIME SPAN

South of Eglin Range

AN OVERALL NET **LOSS**
OF **1,455 K-5** STUDENTS
BELOW THE BASE
DURING THAT TIME SPAN





BIRTH RATES-OUR LOCAL BIRTH RATES ARE TRENDING DOWN AND THE FORECAST PREDICTS THESE RATES TO DECLINE EVEN MORE IN THE FUTURE- A TRAJECTORY WHICH IS INLINE WITH THE NATIONAL TREND.

Historic and Projected Births



Births by (Subdistrict)																												Birth Rates			
		BAKER		CENTRAL CRESTVIEW / ANTIOCH		EASTERN CRESTVIEW		DESTIN		PART OF ANTIOCH / MOSTLY BASE		OCEAN CITY / WRIGHT		FORT WALTON BEACH		SOUTH OF BAKER		LAUREL HILL / MCCORNER		BEACH AREA / HARRIS / MARY ESTHER		NICEVILLE		LONGWOOD / SHALIMAR / LAKE LORRAINE		VALPARAISO		Total	% Change*	Districtwide Rate	School Year
Birth Year	Kinder Year	32531		32536		32539		32541 & 32550		32542		32547		32548		32564		32567		32569		32578		32579		32580					
		Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate	Births	Rate				
2014	2019	58	0.906	419	1.108	371	0.903	205	1.102	94	0.718	538	1.087	282	1.038	43	1.303	45	1.452	187	0.938	344	1.021	115	1.353	53	1.385	2,894	1.046		2019/20
2015	2020	56	0.875	388	1.026	411	1.000	195	1.048	95	0.725	551	1.113	296	1.080	30	0.909	43	1.387	182	1.022	371	1.101	98	1.153	39	1.026	2,811	1.049		2020/21
2016	2021	68	1.031	398	1.048	388	0.895	217	1.187	103	0.788	520	1.051	278	0.988	37	1.121	43	1.387	190	1.087	355	1.053	94	1.106	51	1.342	2,788	1.032		2021/22
2017	2022	69	1.078	339	0.897	418	1.017	212	1.140	87	0.684	507	1.024	284	0.940	32	0.970	29	0.935	177	0.994	346	1.027	103	1.212	45	1.184	2,688	0.996		2022/23
2018	2023	57	0.891	394	1.042	388	0.944	185	0.995	98	0.748	518	1.046	272	0.988	27	0.818	35	1.129	151	0.848	358	1.082	109	1.282	48	1.211	2,781	1.008		2023/24
2019	2024	64	1.088	378	1.088	411	1.088	188	1.088	131	1.088	486	1.088	281	1.088	33	1.088	31	1.088	178	1.088	337	1.088	85	1.088	38	1.088	2,688	1.088	Base Year	2024/25
2020	2025	61	0.953	387	1.024	391	0.951	164	0.882	98	0.748	492	0.994	253	0.900	36	1.091	41	1.323	137	0.770	314	0.932	83	0.978	47	1.237	2,545	0.950	0.950	2025/26
2021	2026	74	1.156	371	0.981	440	1.071	189	1.018	107	0.817	473	0.958	251	0.893	35	1.081	31	1.000	170	0.865	346	1.027	96	1.129	45	1.184	2,678	0.989	0.989	2026/27
2022	2027	86	1.344	361	0.955	463	1.127	141	0.758	88	0.672	469	0.947	216	0.769	35	1.081	52	1.677	148	0.831	297	0.881	87	1.024	53	1.395	2,671	0.959	0.959	2027/28
2023	2028	78	1.219	357	0.944	428	1.036	123	0.881	93	0.710	452	0.913	238	0.851	39	1.182	49	1.581	182	0.910	308	0.914	71	0.835	42	1.105	2,481	0.929	0.929	2028/29
2024	2029		1.219		0.944		1.036		0.881		0.710		0.913		0.851		1.182		1.581		0.910		0.914		0.835		1.105		0.929	0.929	2029/30
2025	2030		1.219		0.944		1.036		0.881		0.710		0.913		0.851		1.182		1.581		0.910		0.914		0.835		1.105		0.929	0.929	2030/31
2026	2031		1.219		0.944		1.036		0.881		0.710		0.913		0.851		1.182		1.581		0.910		0.914		0.835		1.105		0.929	0.929	2031/32
2027	2032		1.219		0.944		1.036		0.881		0.710		0.913		0.851		1.182		1.581		0.910		0.914		0.835		1.105		0.929	0.929	2032/33
2028	2033		1.219		0.944		1.036		0.881		0.710		0.913		0.851		1.182		1.581		0.910		0.914		0.835		1.105		0.929	0.929	2033/34
2029	2034		1.219		0.944		1.036		0.881		0.710		0.913		0.851		1.182		1.581		0.910		0.914		0.835		1.105		0.929	0.929	2034/35

OKALOOSA SCHOOLS



THE NEXT GENERATION...