



**MINUTES
REGULAR MEETING
of THE MARY ESTHER CITY COUNCIL
January 20, 2026 - 6:00 PM**

195 Christobal Road – North, Mary Esther, FL 32569

CITY COUNCIL PRESENT

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

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

Kelvin Cherry, Code Compliance Officer
Heather Day, Finance Director
Shawn Lindsey, Public Works Director

OTHERS PRESENT

Chad Rewis, OSCO Captain

Jeff Wagner, OCWFD Chief

1. INVOCATION

Jeff Wagner, Ocean City-Wright Fire Control District, gave the invocation.

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 Coxwell to participate virtually. Councilmember Carter initiated the motion, seconded by Councilmember Sutton. The motion passed unanimously.

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

5. APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

Mayor Stein asked if the council wished to make any changes to the agenda. He stated that City Manager Cobb requested that item 6.2 be moved to February. Mayor Stein asked for a motion to approve the agenda, moving item 6.2 to February. Councilmember Sutton initiated the motion, seconded by Councilmember Lawson. The motion passed unanimously.

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

6. SPECIAL PRESENTATIONS

6.1. Citizen of the Year 2026 Award

Mayor Stein presented the award for Citizen of the Year 2026 to Connie Schabowski.

6.2. Jacobs Asset Management Plan Update

7. CONSENT AGENDA

Mayor Stein asked if the council wished to make any changes to the consent agenda. Hearing none, Mayor Stein asked for a motion. Councilmember Sutton initiated the motion, seconded by Councilmember Carter. The motion passed unanimously.

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

7.1. Financial Report

7.2. Public Works Report

7.3. Library Report

7.4. Fire Department Report

7.5. Code Compliance Report

7.6. Jacobs Report

7.7. Law Enforcement Report

7.8. Minutes of the December 8, 2025, Regular Council Meeting

7.9. Minutes of the January 6, 2026, Special Council Meeting

8. CITIZENS WHO HAVE REQUESTED TO BE PLACED ON THE AGENDA

8.1. LaVante Holmes - 1841 Whispering Oaks Ln, FWB

LaVante Holmes was not present at the time of this item.

8.2. Shiv Patel - 480 E Miracle Strip Pkwy

Shiv Patel, 480 E Miracle Strip Pkwy, thanked the mayor and council for allowing him to speak, discussed the water and sewer billing structure, stating it is outdated, the issues as they apply to hotels, and asked staff and council to review the ordinance. The mayor and council discussed his statements and agreed with them. City Manager Cobb stated that staff can review it and potentially conduct a rate study. Councilmember Carter asked how long it would take, with City Manager Cobb stating it could come back in March. Councilmember Carter discussed comparing Mary Esther to other cities and conducting a rate study, and the council agreed. Mayor Pro Tem emphasized the need to know the cost before continuing. City Manager Cobb stated he will bring it back in the March meeting.

9. PUBLIC COMMENT (NON-AGENDA ITEMS)

None.

10. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

10.1. Consideration: Mary Esther Boulevard Landscaping Project

Public Works Director Lindsey presented the background on this agenda item. Charlie Johnson of Kimley-Horn continued discussing clear sight distances, the plant selection process, and maintenance requirements. Councilmember Coxwell asked whether the oaks are as big as the

others around the city, and Charlie Johnson stated they are a different kind of oak. Mayor Stein asked if there was any more discussion. Hearing none, Mayor Stein asked for a motion to approve the landscape design for the Mary Esther Boulevard median beautification project and authorize staff to proceed to bid. Mayor Pro Tem Oder initiated the motion, seconded by Councilmember Carter. The motion passed unanimously.

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

11. NEW BUSINESS

- 11.1. Consideration: Award of RFB 2025-02 for Bonded Rubber Trail at Azalea Park**
Public Works Director Lindsey discussed the results of RFB 2025-02. Councilmember Sutton asked which version would open the park more quickly, and Public Works Director Lindsey stated the alternative. Councilmember Sutton asked what lines would run through the park in the water sewer pipe rehab, with Public Works Director Lindsey stating the front area. Mayor Stein asked if there was any more discussion. Upon hearing none, Mayor Stein asked for a motion to award RFB 2025-02 to Ranger Rubber LLC in the amount of \$117,514 for the bonded rubber trail at Azalea Park, contingent upon satisfactory review of color and material samples. Councilmember Lawson initiated the motion, seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Oder. The motion passed 4-1.

RESULT:	PASSED (4-1)
MOVER:	Councilmember Richard Lawson
SECOND:	Mayor Pro Tem Bernie Oder
AYES:	Larry Carter, Bernie Oder, Richard Lawson, Susan Coxwell
NAYS:	April Sutton

- 11.2. Discussion: West Highway 98 Property**
Councilmember Sutton discussed the West Highway 98 property. City Attorney Dykes discussed researching the property, but it is listed as a roadway and can either be platted for a road or abandoned. Mayor Stein asked whether it could be changed, and City Attorney Dykes said it would be returned to the adjacent property owners. Councilmember Coxwell stated that the adjacent property owners were already using the property. Councilmember Sutton stated that abandoning it would take maintenance off the city and increase property ad valorem taxes. City Manager Cobb stated that it was a potential future waterfront access point for the city. Councilmember Carter asked whether a stipulation could be put on it if abandoned, but City Attorney Dykes stated that stipulations were not permitted. Councilmember Coxwell stated there was a similar situation with the roadway at the cemetery. Mayor Pro Tem Oder noted that if the state eliminates ad valorem taxes in the upcoming election, the point is moot.
- 11.3. Discussion: Proposed Mary Esther Elementary School Closure**
City Manager Cobb provided an update on the proposed closure of Mary Esther Elementary School. Parker Destin, School Board member, was present to answer questions. Mayor Pro Tem Oder asked about the methodology. Parker Destin discussed budget constraints, changes in education and alternative offerings, the population pyramid flipping, the aging population, consolidation across the state, budget cuts over the years, funding constraints, and enrollment numbers. Mayor Pro Tem Oder discussed the school board's decision to choose Mary Esther,

school bus issues stemming from the base split between Florosa and Mary Esther Elementary, and the importance of a school in a community. Councilmember Coxwell asked whether Gaetz's reform bill had been passed, and Parker Destin stated it passed the Senate but does not know whether it has a sponsor in the House yet. She asked whether parents know that pulling their kids out of public education would reduce school funding, and why the closure of Mary Esther Elementary was never discussed with the city. Parker Destin stated he hopes the bill gets a House sponsor, potential issues with the government not fixing broken systems, displacing more people than helping, and that he would promise open communication going forward. He also stated that the state government would not promote scrutiny of a program they are pushing. Councilmember Sutton discussed losing the school, COVID's impact on education, the lack of communication, taking care of the families, kids, and staff affected, the school board's consideration of who they sell the property to, and the next steps for everyone. Parker Destin stated there would be more deliberation in the future about what would happen to the property. John Spolski, assistant superintendent, discussed that it is a tough topic, the school district is watching other schools as well, changes in demographics on the north and south sides of the county, visiting other schools to prepare them for the closures, declining enrollment, and the issues surrounding this topic. Councilmember Sutton commended them on their growing graduation rate but stated that changes need to be made in the city. John Spolski discussed building a K-8 school in the north of the county and potentially one in the southern part of the county eventually. Mayor Stein asked about the difference in the results of alternative education. John Spolski stated that he is interested in the long-term results, that the voucher program is affecting elementary schools more than middle and high schools, and that there are difficulties in transitioning from homeschool to public school. Councilmember Lawson asked if a charter school coming in would be an option. Parker Destin stated he did not know, but that charter schools are dealing with similar issues. Councilmember Carter commented on the change from schools to financial institutions, discussing the Fort Walton Beach Home Depot being a former school, and that, in the end, hoping it will be a good outcome for all parties. Mayor Pro Tem Oder asked whether the school board was aware of a petition to stop the school's closure (see attachment), and Parker Destin stated they were.

11.4. Update: Christobal Waterfront Park Project

City Manager Cobb discussed an update on the Christbol Waterfront Park project, including revised plans for the dock and a living shoreline. Mayor Stein asked if there was any discussion, to which there was none.

12. COUNCILS' STANDING COMMITTEE STATUS REPORTS

Councilmember Sutton discussed her cruise, attending the Sheriff's Department ceremony, and thanking everyone who showed up for the school closing topic.

Councilmember Coxwell thanked everyone who attended the school closing discussion.

Councilmember Lawson had no additional comments

Mayor Stein discussed attending the ribbon-cutting for Okaloosa Gas and the ribbon-cutting for a new park in Okaloosa County.

Councilmember Carter thanked those who attended the Sheriff's Department ceremony and thanked everyone who showed up for the school closing topic.

Mayor Pro Tem Oder discussed the next library cooperative meeting, the upcoming legislative meetings, and being invited to the mayor's regional roundtable in Ocala.

13. OTHER COMMENTS

City Attorney Dykes had no additional comments

City Clerk Morris reminded council to check their mailboxes and to complete their yearly required training and forms.

City Manager Cobb discussed the upcoming legislative meetings.

14. **ADJOURN**

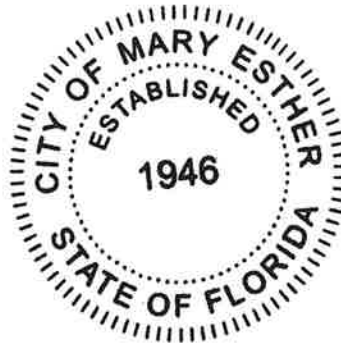
The council meeting adjourned at 7:35 p.m.

Minutes approved at the
meeting.

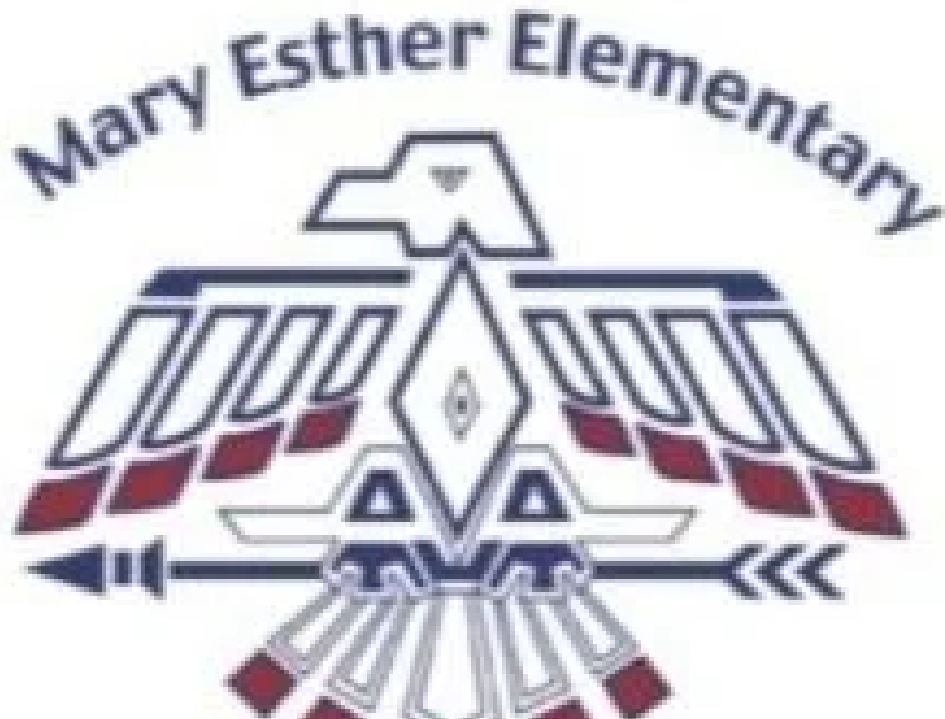
2/2/2026

Dillon Morris

Dillon Morris, City Clerk



Start a petition



Stop the closure of Mary Esther Elementary School

 Sign petition

512 

Verified signatures 

 Let's get to 1000 signatures!

Petitions with 1,000+ supporters are 5x more likely to win!

Recent signers:

Brittney Beatty • 12 hours ago

Logan Belknap • 12 hours ago

Rondale Graham • 1 day ago

Annie Byers • 1 day ago



[Decision Makers: Linda Evanchyk +7](#)



[11 Supporter Voices](#)



[1 Update](#)

The Issue

Mary Esther Elementary School is more than just an educational institution; it is the heart of our community, a beacon of excellence, and a second home to many. The decision to close Mary Esther Elementary would not only disrupt countless lives but would also sever the strong ties that bind our neighborhood together. With its dedicated staff, exceptional educators, and unparalleled family involvement, Mary Esther has stood out as a pillar of academic achievement and community spirit.

The school's success is anchored in its incredible educators who have nurtured and guided students, fostering not only academic growth but also character development. Their unwavering dedication has resulted in a nurturing and empowering environment where children thrive. Additionally, family involvement at Mary Esther is unmatched. Parents, grandparents, and guardians come together to support the school's endeavors, ensuring that every event is a community effort and that every child gets the utmost care and support, both in and out of the classroom.

Closing Mary Esther Elementary would mean losing this invaluable community resource, a place that has cultivated friendships, community engagement, and cherished memories for students and their families. It would also lead to overcrowded classrooms in nearby schools, degrading the quality of education that our children deserve.

We urge the school board and local authorities to reconsider this decision. Let us explore alternative solutions that prioritize our children's education, such as restructuring the

 **51 people** signed this week

 **Sign petition**

Elementary School's legacy and its continued role as a cornerstone of our community.

We need your support to make your voices heard. We implore everyone who believes in safeguarding our children's future to stand with us. Please sign this petition to keep Mary Esther Elementary School open and thriving.

[Report a policy violation](#)



Nicole Potter

Petition Starter

[Media inquiries](#)

The Decision Makers ⓘ



Okaloosa County School Board

3 Members



Linda Evanchyk

Okaloosa County School Board - District 3



Lamar White

Okaloosa County School Board - District 1



Diane Kelley

Okaloosa County School Board - District 5

51 people signed this week



Okaloosa County School Board

Awaiting response



Tim Bryant

Okaloosa County School Board

Awaiting response



Brett Hinley

Okaloosa County School Board

Awaiting response



Okaloosa County School District

Awaiting response

[View all 8 Decision Makers](#)

Supporter Voices

 **51 people** signed this week

**Kelly, Mary Esther**

1 month ago

“My heart is absolutely shattered by this proposal. I am all things Mary Esther Elementary and absolutely love what I do and who I do it with. My history as a Thunderbird began way before employment. I am a product of Okaloosa County Schools and a PROUD PRODUCT OF MARY ESTHER ELEMENTARY. We returned to this area so my girls could be Thunderbirds and...”

Show full text

♡ 9 Likes 🚩 Report

**Angela, Arlington**

4 days ago

“‘I’m a Thunderbird, yes a Thunderbird, and I go to Mary Esther Elementary. It’s the school I love. A cut above.’ That song still lives in my heart, because it captures exactly what this school was—and still is—a cut above. Now, as a parent, I find myself telling my own elementary-school-aged daughter about my time at Mary Esther Elementary and how...”

Show full text

♡ 1 Like 🚩 Report

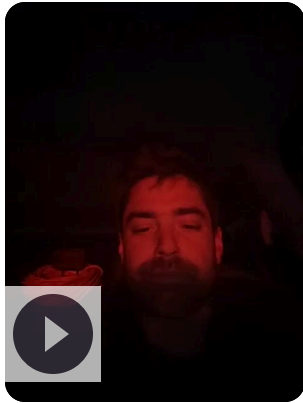
**Aveld, Mary Esther**

1 month ago

“Please sign this important petition ! This is awesome that a parent is trying so hard to save this amazing school! My wife’s life has been at this school. From her going there as a child, her mother volunteering there, to her volunteering there and then becoming an employee! She eats and breathes Mary Esther Elementary! Go Thunderbirds!!”

♡ 6 Likes 🚩 Report

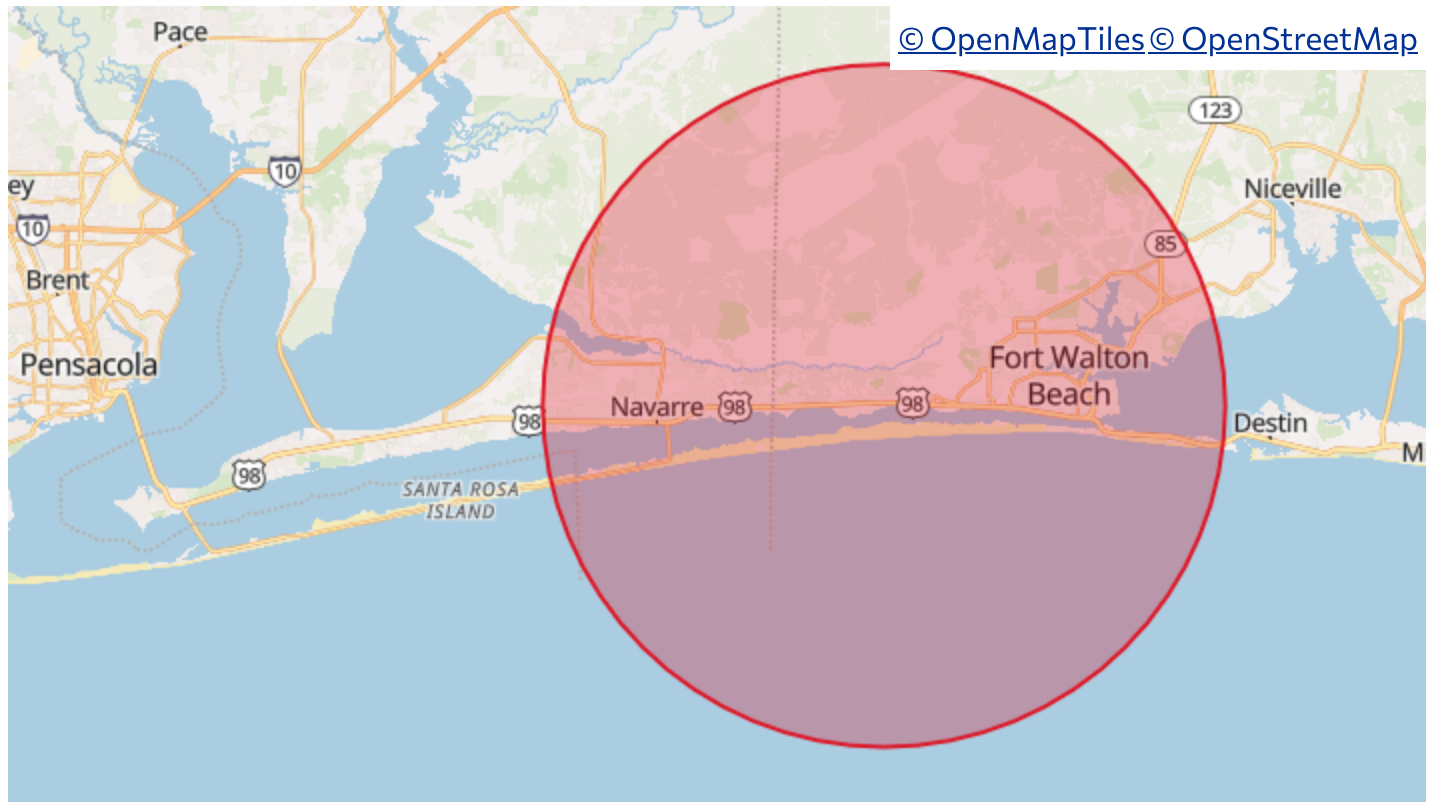
👤 **51 people** signed this week



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About the supporters



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51 people signed this week



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\$4	\$6	\$11
\$21	Other	

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Petition updates



Let's get more signatures for this petition New

1 month ago • Nicole Potter, Petition Starter

Hi all, I wanted to let you know that we now have 300 signatures on this petition

51 people signed this week

250 supporters!

1 month ago

Nicole Potter started this petition!

1 month ago

Share this petition



Share this petition in person or use the QR code for your own material.

Download QR Code



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WhatsApp

Facebook



Nextdoor

Email

X

Petition created on December 11, 2025

51 people signed this week

Company	Community	Support	Connect	Guides
About	Blog	Help	X	Petition Guides
Impact	Press	Privacy	Facebook	Create Your Petition
Careers	Community Guidelines	Terms	Instagram	Collect Signatures
Team		Accessibility Statement	TikTok	Reach out to Media
		Cookie Policy		Engage Your Decision Maker
		Manage Cookies		

English (United States) ▼

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 **51 people** signed this week