



THE RIGDON CENTER

The Okaloosa County Fairgrounds, located behind the Courthouse on Lewis Turner Boulevard, were historically owned and operated by the City of Fort Walton Beach. In 2022, the Fort Walton Beach City Council declared the property surplus. Recognizing its potential value—and the possibility that it could be sold for private development—the Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners entered into negotiations to acquire the site as a valuable public asset. The County officially purchased the property in March 2023.

In July 2023, the Board established a seven-member citizen advisory committee to help guide the enhancement and refurbishment of the fairgrounds. The committee included representatives from the Northwest Florida Fair Association, the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, and one appointee from each County Commissioner. The Fort Walton Beach City Manager served in a non-voting, *ex officio* role.

Based on the committee's recommendations, a long-term, five-phase master plan was developed to guide the future growth and direction of the property. As part of this plan, the facility was rebranded as the Rigdon Center Complex in honor of Bull Rigdon, who managed the facility for many years.

Since acquiring the property, the County has made significant progress on Phase I improvements. These include the demolition of dilapidated structures and major upgrades to electrical systems, HVAC, lighting, ceilings, drainage, and overall aesthetics. Installation of new epoxy flooring is nearing completion, with security and audiovisual systems scheduled for installation soon.

Additionally, construction is underway on a new 3,000-square-foot building between Buildings B and C. This addition will feature event catering kitchens, concession areas, and modern restroom facilities. Completion is expected in just over six months. The façade portion of the project will soon go out for bid and will include three new entrances, updated signage, additional parking, decorative walls, covered walkways, and refreshed landscaping.

Once Phase I is complete later this year, the facility will offer approximately 50,000 square feet of affordable event space capable of hosting festivals, trade shows, business meetings, and a wide variety of community events.

Designing and permitting projects of this scale requires considerable time—often up to a year. As planning continues for Phases II and III, the next step is to begin the design phase for a new multi-purpose event center. This phase is expected to take about a year, with construction bidding likely in 2027.

The proposed expansion includes approximately 50,000 square feet of new space, complementing the existing 50,000 square feet, an additional 20,000 square feet of storage, and 15 acres of outdoor event area. The main event hall—approximately 35,000 to 40,000 square feet—will be designed as a flexible, divisible space with seating capacity for up to 3,000 people.

This facility will support a wide range of events, including cheerleading and dance competitions, volleyball, wrestling, pickleball, large trade shows, and community and military gatherings. Its capabilities will position the County to attract larger, multi-day events and remain competitive with similar venues.

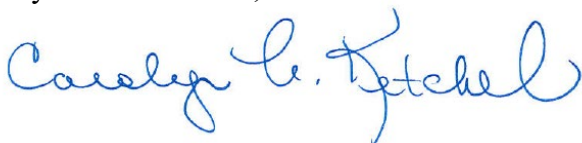
Planned features include high ceilings (40+ feet), durable flooring, a mezzanine level, elevators, multiple flooring types, fixed seating, breakout rooms, and specialty-use spaces. The building will be a hardened metal structure, enhancing resilience and offering potential use during hurricane events.

The campus includes 20.4 acres of outdoor space for events and parking, along with an additional 15.83 acres of adjacent County-owned land. The City of Fort Walton Beach also maintains a large asphalt area nearby that may be used for overflow parking or event support on a limited basis.

Project costs include land acquisition, construction, parking, stormwater systems, landscaping, and pedestrian access improvements. Funding for the new facility will come from a variety of non-taxpayer sources, including grants from the Gulf Consortium, tourism development funds, legislative appropriations, and state agricultural grants. No property tax dollars are planned to be used for this project.

It is an honor to serve as your Commissioner.

My Sincere Thanks,



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