

School Delay in Orange Beach

900 words

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November 10, 2018

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Leaving people clutching their pearls, Orange Beach Mayor Tony Kennon announced another delay. The cost of building the new school was bid \$20 million over budget, postponing the opening of the Middle School/High School on Canal Road. (<https://www.wkrg.com/news/baldwin-county/new-school-construction-in-orange-beach-hits-a-snag/1568887993>).

Eddie Tyler (Baldwin County School Board Superintendent) said the delay could affect the possible timeline for opening the new school, probably until August 2020, according to a report in Gulf Coast News Today (<http://www.gulfcoastnewstoday.com/stories/baldwin-county-board-of-education-takes-no-action-on-orange-beach-high-school-construction-bid,69354>).

“Coming in \$20 million over the projected estimates for this project is just not something I can support, nor do I think this board [of education] could support,” said David Tarwater, Baldwin County School Board Member and Chairman of the Finance Committee, according to a report in Gulf Coast News Today (<http://www.gulfcoastnewstoday.com/stories/baldwin-county-board-of-education-takes-no-action-on-orange-beach-high-school-construction-bid,69354>).

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Proposed Orange Beach Middle School/High School, according to a report in Fox10 News (https://www.fox10tv.com/news/details-revealed-about-new-orange-beach-high-school/article_479470ae-1a8d-5469-9762-556dc6d21e3e.html).

The Orange Beach City Council tried twice before to establish their own independent school system, funded by increased property taxes (*ad valorem*) in 2007 and again in 2014 (https://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2014/07/opponents_of_orange_beach_scho.html), only to have both referendums fail by a wide margin (<https://lagniappemobile.com/orange-beach-voters-defeat-school-split-referendum/>).

This time the school's funding is not tied to additional property taxes, because the Baldwin County Board of Education is paying for the project. Hurricane Michael's cleanup in Mexico City severely reduced the availability of construction crews. The impact of tariffs on construction materials has driven up demand for resources well beyond the projected cost estimates.

The community wants a school, and the constituents are behind the Council, but the funding shortfall is so enormous that Council may have to innovate, possibly imposing more taxes on the tourists. I respectfully suggest a sin tax on alcohol, tobacco products, and sugary drinks.

Orange Beach residents understand the cost of education, but baby boomers do not want the expense of increased *ad valorem* taxes, educating someone else's child. That is not why they invested in retirement property on the island.

School Board Superintendent Tyler's school proposal to build a Middle School/High School in Orange Beach is welcome, triggered by Gulf Shores' successful establishment of

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their own independent school system. Tyler's proposal is self funded, imposing no additional taxes on Orange Beach residents.

"We are not only building this school but negotiating the separation from GS [Gulf Shores]. We know that the project [school build] will go out for bid again with a different completion date [2020]," said Norma Hoots Lynch, School Board Member for Orange Beach in an email.

"Our staff who handle building and bidding believe the high price and single bid were due to an extremely accelerated timeframe in a difficult location due to tourist traffic combined with a shortage of labor due to rebuilding in Florida," said David B. Cox, Baldwin County School Board Member in an email.

As an onlooker the plan going forward is like a fork in the road. Kill the school, because future construction bids will not come in under budget, or the City of Orange Beach can use their reserves to subsidize the short fall. In either case the residents are not burdened with additional *ad valorem* taxes.

"We're looking at various options and the superintendent will be making a recommendation soon," said Shannon Cauley, Baldwin County School Board Member in an email.

"There was just no way," said Orange Beach Mayor Tony Kennon, responding to the \$42 million bid by Mississippi-based Thrash Contractors in a report in AL.com (<https://www.al.com/education/2018/11/sky-high-school-price-a-stunner-in-baldwin-county.html>).

The key issue is patience. Millennials with children attending local schools must believe in the dream of their own Middle School/High School, accepting that their kids will be in portables or bussed to Gulf Shores for a year or more (2019-2020) while the new school is built.

The reality is this. The bid process will take longer than anyone anticipates, especially given the rising cost of steel and building materials, caused by tariffs. Thus pushing the Baldwin County Board of Education and the City of Orange Beach into lengthy negotiations, deciding how to make ends meet.

The Alabama State Board of Education insists the financial complexities be resolved at the local level. "The state department doesn't take an active role in construction or bids," said Eric G. Mackey, State Superintendent, Alabama State Department of Education in an email.

"I am the State Board rep for District 1 [Baldwin County]. It [the bid overage] is a local issue, not state," said Jackie Zeigler, Alabama State School Board Member, in an email.

Shovel ready projects are not as simple as the language suggests. Would it be cheaper to drop the entire Middle School/High School project, opting to pay tuition for each Orange Beach child to attend Gulf Shores' independent schools, freeing up millions for curriculum in the county?

Thinking out loud, every community wants excellent schools. Deciding what is most important requires bipartisan consensus of the City Council, dedicating significant wealth to the prosperity of the next generation of Orange Beach graduates, or building the Wolf Bay Bridge. We cannot do both.

ENDS.