

Midterm Results in Orange Beach

1300 words

Rauf Bolden, Orange Beach

December 2, 2018

Midterm Results in Orange Beach

Midterm reflects the election cycle. The middle of Mayor Kennon's term (2016-2018) saw one-third of the Orange Beach City Council try to leave, seeking higher office. Councilman Jeff Boyd ran for Alabama State Senate, and Councilman Jerry Johnson ran for Baldwin County Commissioner. Both failed by a wide margin. Their campaigns were underfunded and untested, returning to the Council Chambers in Orange Beach richer for their experience, perhaps launching a retry in 2022, or mounting a run for Mayor in 2020.

Some people feel Orange Beach's Ordinance banning short-term rentals (Ordinance 2018-

1282) cost the council members' their election bid, seeing the ban as stepping on a person's property rights, limiting what a family can do with their home, making houses in residential areas harder to sell.

"BCAR [Baldwin County Association of Realtors] represents over 2,000 REALTORS® across Baldwin and Mobile counties, and advocates for homeownership, private property rights, and vibrant communities. BCAR supports candidates who share the vision of the association," according to a report on the BCAR website (<http://www.baldwinrealtors.com/index.php?src=news&refno=105&category=Association%20News>).

Obviously the ban is an infringement on property rights, for not minimizing government's role in the local economy, for not restoring liberty from government interference, essentially abandoning pre-eminent conservative ideals in Republican Alabama (<http://altoday.com/archives/24515-rauf-bolden-vanishing-property-rights-in-orange-beach>).

Espousing conservatism, the Council's legislative calendar from 2016 - 2018 saw no cuts in property taxes for residents; big increases in deductibles for city employees' health care; and a short term rental ban on residential properties.

The proposed projects over the next two years (2018-2020) are more ambitious, bolstering economic stimulus, including a new Middle School/High School on Canal Road (Diagram 1); widening of Canal Road (Diagram 2); and starting the Wolf Bay Bridge (Diagram 3). These are economic-stimulus projects costing tens of million of dollars, creating jobs, and helping the local economy prior to the next election cycle.

NEW ORANGE BEACH HIGH SCHOOL / MIDDLE SCHOOL

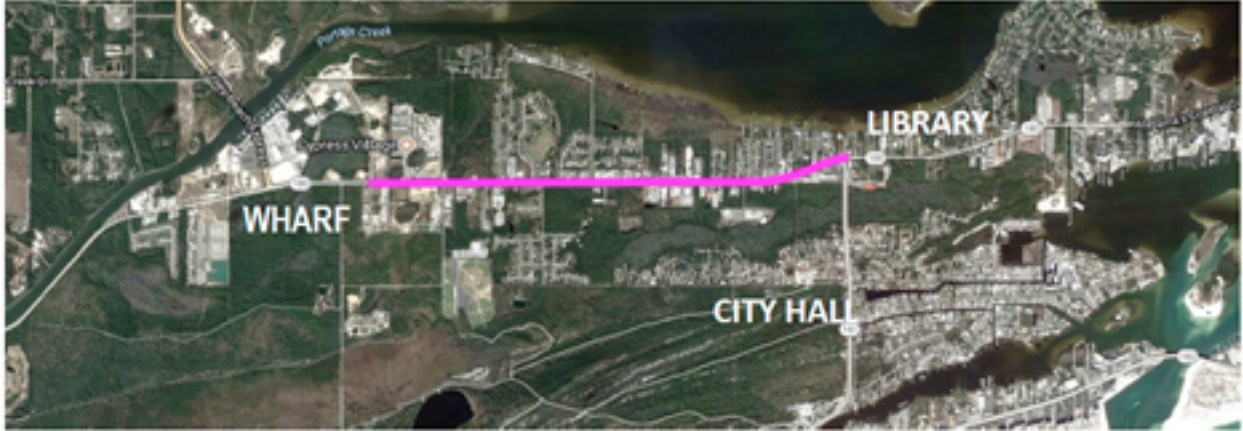
- \$15 Million BCBE investment on city-donated land. (40 acres w/ estimated value of \$6M)
- Grades 7-12
- “Game Changer!”
- State-of-the-Art Performing Arts Center (city)



Diagram 1: Middle School/High School on Canal Road at William Silvers Pkwy., From Mayor Kennon’s State of the City, May 2018 (<https://orangebeachal.gov/news/mayor-tony-kennon-presents-state-city-chambers-first-friday-forum>)

Canal Road Widening

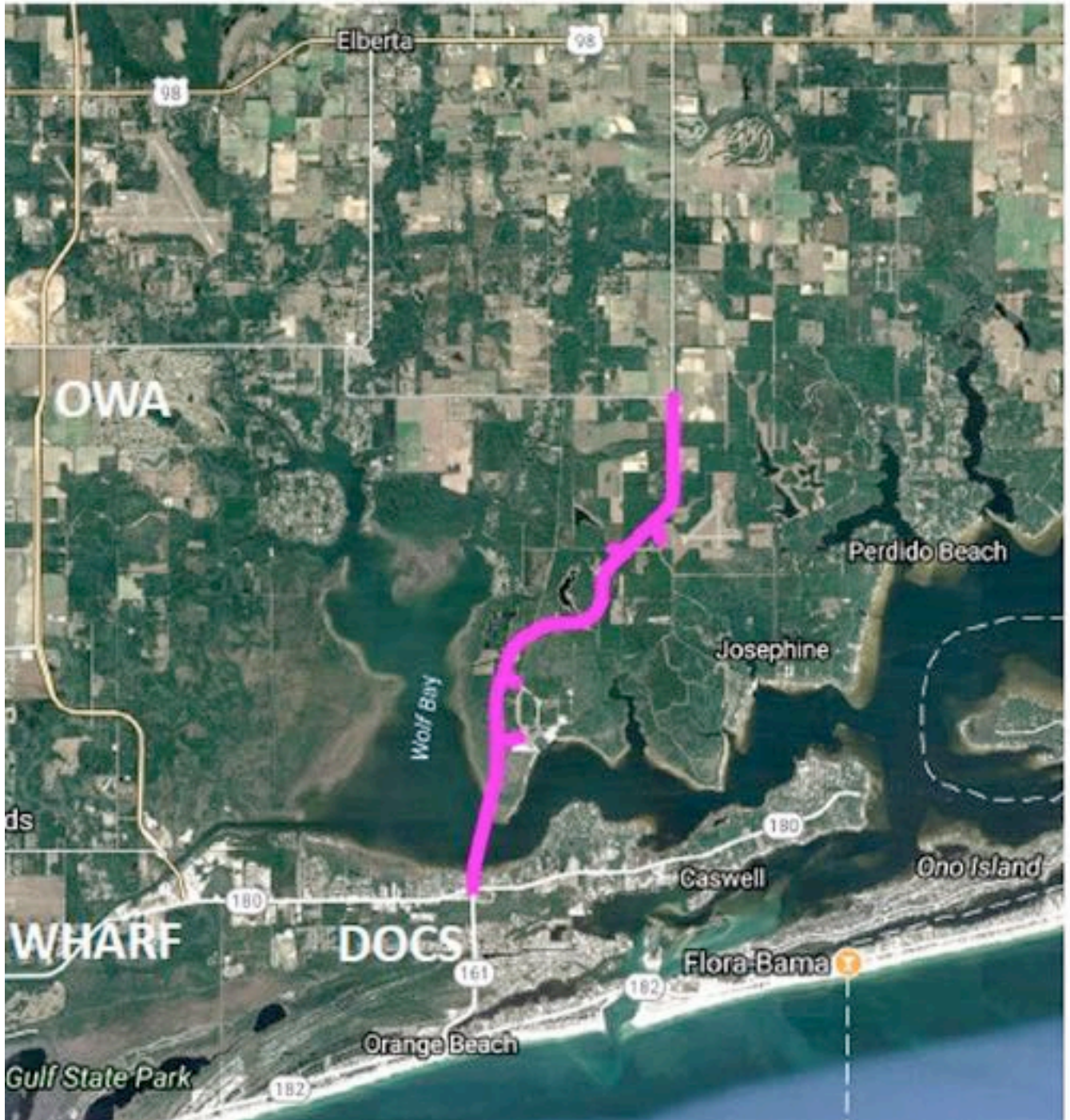
William Silvers Pkwy to Orange Beach Blvd



Alabama Department of Transportation to begin additional Canal Road eastbound lane construction in 2018. Anticipated project completion spring of 2020.

Diagram 2: Widening Canal Road will continue past Hwy 161 to Wilson Blvd., removing the Tom Thumb shopping complex at Canal and Hwy 161, making a turn lane. From Mayor Kennon's State of the City, May 2018 (<https://orangebeachal.gov/news/mayor-tony-kennon-presents-state-city-chambers-first-friday-forum>)

Wolf Bay Bridge



Midterm Results in Orange Beach

Diagram 3: Wolf Bay Bridge, From Mayor Kennon's State of the City, May 2018
(<https://orangebeachal.gov/news/mayor-tony-kennon-presents-state-city-chambers-first-friday-forum>)

Council started the revenue ball rolling in the first two years of this term (2016-2018), generating additional revenue with a 2% increase in lodging tax from 11% to 13%, supposedly underwriting the cost of the Wolf Bay Bridge. The rest of the infrastructure money is coming from tax revenue saved up over Mayor Kennon's previous two terms.

Spending these monies on infrastructure is a good idea, because moving traffic keeps the tourists happy and a happy tourist is the city's cash cow. They provide a revenue stream, paying sales taxes on groceries, fueling their boats, buying water toys and so on.

Another possibility for more revenue exists as the city approved 65 Liquor Licenses, including Special Events, in the two years prior to the midterm, according to an email from Renee Eberly, City Clerk in Orange Beach. Perhaps a sin tax on alcohol, tobacco products, and sugary drinks, generating extra cash, helping pay for infrastructure projects or school amenities is an alternative source of funding.

"[A new] High School is a great idea. There are new families coming to the area and they are going to need a good school. The only problem is the traffic. It is already bad enough. I don't know how they are going to fix it," said Margie Soto a 24-year resident of the island.

"I would like to see Canal Road [Hwy 180] widened, and I would like to see the Wolf Bay Bridge built," said Steve Russo an Orange Beach resident of 38 years.

Keeping City Council in step is the key issue if Mayor Kennon wants to push his post-midterm agenda forward. Orange Beach's Elected Officials serve at-large not by districts. They represent all the constituents at once. Even though the elected officials represent all the registered voters, Council members voted with Mayor Kennon 99% of the time, showing Tony Kennon's iron grip on the process.

Joe Emerson commented on the gravity of his experience in the Council Chambers at City Hall, making inquiries about how the Flyover Bridge (diagram below) west of the Foley Beach Express was funded. "I would like to say that I took Mayor Kennon's advice and went to 2 City Council meetings 'to get the facts' [about the flyover bridge]. Not once, but twice I was denied access to public information about the project (after being assured that my request for the white papers was approved). Not once but twice, my character was attacked because I refuse to just go with the flow [bend the knee]. Not once but twice, I left the Orange Beach City Council Chambers with more incentive to get to the bottom of this [flyover bridge funding]," wrote Joe Emerson in a Facebook post (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/155706324781200/permalink/757157607969399/>).

Flyover Bridge and Access Road in Orange Beach, West of the Foley Beach Express

Midterm Results in Orange Beach



From ALDOT's Website

(<https://rp.dot.state.al.us/WaterwayBlvd/pdf/PublicHearingMap.pdf>)

A State Official is also seeking answers. "ALDOT has managed to side-step Jim Zeigler's [State Auditor's] requests [about funding] for well over six months, and thus, for the third time, Zeigler is asking for further information [from ALDOT] about an \$87 million state-funded bridge [flyover bridge] project in Baldwin County [Orange Beach]," according to a report in Alabama Today (<http://altoday.com/archives/27508-jim-zeigler-vows-to-continue-to-request-information-from-aldot-on-baldwin-county-bridge-project>).

"I learned there's no logical and reasonable opposition [to this flyover bridge]," said Orange Beach Mayor Tony Kennon to Yellowhammer News, during ALDOT's Public Hearing in Gulf Shores on 11/15 (<https://yellowhammernews.com/terri-sewell-on-house-speaker-race-im-a-supporter-of-nancy-pelosi/>).

Some residents fear City Council may float a neck-snapping bond issue never seen before in Baldwin County, financing the Wolf Bay Bridge, hiring a bond issuer, perhaps negotiating reimbursements for expenses. The worry is what it will cost to pay down this debt, and how many years the residents are indebted, probably long after the present council retires.

Opponents of the Wolf Bay Bridge are motivated, campaigning vigorously against more infrastructures (indebtedness), demanding a Referendum, letting the constituents vote before spending \$50 million on the Wolf Bay Bridge (<https://www.facebook.com/nobaybridge/>).

Wolf Bay Bridge - Rendering

Midterm Results in Orange Beach



From Mayor Kennon's State of the City, May 2018

(<https://orangebeachal.gov/news/mayor-tony-kennon-presents-state-city-chambers-first-friday-forum>)

"We are very concerned about the economic risk involved in building of this 1.2 mile bridge [Wolf Bay Bridge]. In addition to the astronomical expense for the taxpayers, there is the safety and liability risk of toxic spills [benzene] from barge accidents on extremely busy interstate waterway. The intention to build up the north shore to bring more traffic to Orange Beach seems irrational at this point," wrote Lucy Hazebrook in an email. Lucy is a 28-year resident of Orange Beach, and founder of the opposition groups: No Wolf Bay Bridge (<https://www.change.org/p/no-wolf-bay-bridge-in-orange-beach-a-citizens-group?signed=true>), and the Facebook Group of the same name (<https://www.facebook.com/nobaybridge/>).

This midterm report card looks in the rear-view mirror at tax increases, and the short-term rental ban; but also looks forward at infrastructure projects and schools. These forward-looking projects will change the face of Canal Road (Hwy 180) forever.

Some residents are unhappy about these infrastructure expenditures (<https://www.change.org/p/no-wolf-bay-bridge-in-orange-beach-a-citizens-group>)

Midterm Results in Orange Beach

group?signed=true), but the majority seem to welcome them, putting the wind at Tony's back in the next election cycle, propelling Mayor Kennon to another term.

ENDS.