

# Breaking Promises in Orange Beach

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A politician once told me, "The bigger the smile, the sharper the knife." So, it is in Orange Beach.

In 2008, Mayor Tony Kennon came to power on rhetoric espousing the Republican ideal of smaller government. "Small government is a term generally used by political conservatives to describe a government with minimal involvement in public policy or the private sector," according to a report in Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small\\_government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small_government)).

Political conservatism has similar goals, "lower taxes, free market capitalism, free enterprise, deregulation and restrictions on labor unions," according to a report in Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic>).

After winning the election, Tony Kennon took the oath of office, proceeded to cut employee benefits, appropriations, vehicles, and staff, reducing Police to 35 people (Charts 1 & 2). His Council Class of 2008 was proud.

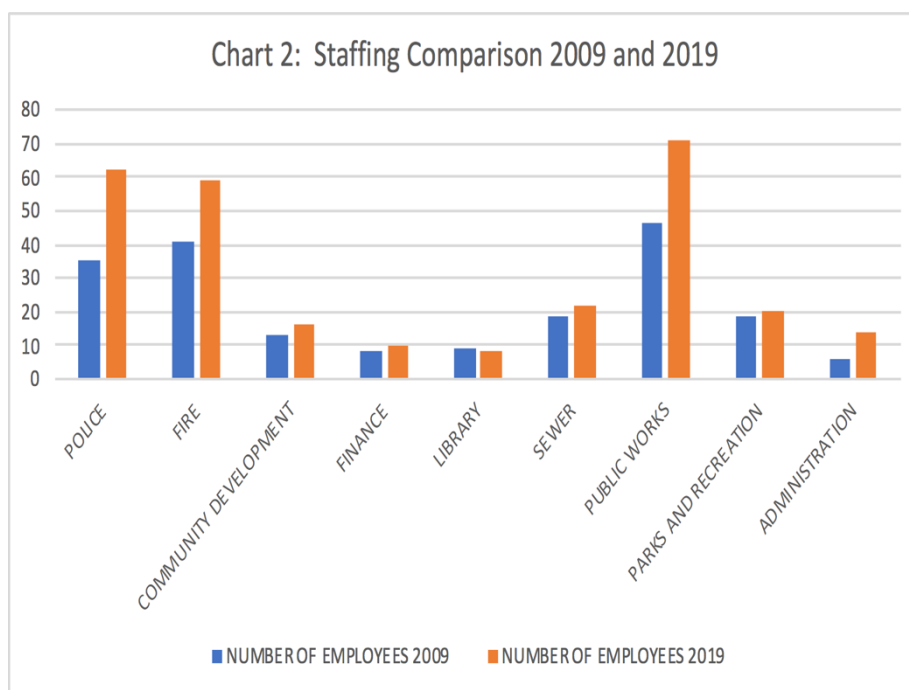
Today the late Councilman Ed Carroll would not recognize the ideology he shared with Tony Kennon back in 2008. Orange Beach's government has grown by 69.5%, yet the local population has stagnated around 5,700, according to a report on City Data (<http://www.city-data.com/city/Orange-Beach-Alabama.html>).

Chart 1: Employee Comparison for City Departments 2009 and 2019

CITY DEPARTMENT	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES 2009	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES 2019
POLICE	35	62
FIRE	41	59
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT	13	16
FINANCE	8	10
LIBRARY	9	8
SEWER	19	22
PUBLIC WORKS	46	71
PARKS AND RECREATION	19	20

## Breaking Promises in Orange Beach

ADMINISTRATION	6	14
TOTAL EMPLOYEES	196	282



Source: Orange Beach City Clerk's Office in an email

Republican orthodoxy is woven into the fabric of Orange Beach residents. Baldwin County overwhelmingly voted for the Christian Theologian Judge Roy Moore (61.7%) in the special senatorial election in 2017 (<https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/alabama-senate-special-election-roy-moore-doug-jones>), confirming residents' belief in small government as a conservative value. Yet somehow the Mayor of Orange Beach is not on the same page.

Pre-2008, Mayor Steve Russo provided voting residents with amenities: Recreation Center, Tennis Center, Aquatic Center, Library, Senior Center, and Sportsplex. When the city's purse was full, he gave back to the community.

Post-2008, Mayor Tony Kennon's regime generates \$15 million above expenses each year, and has over \$40 million in reserves. While the city's purse is bulging, residents are given increased fees on sewer, restricted vacation rentals, and higher lodging taxes.

Looking back to the pre-Kennon era resident memberships at the Recreation Center, including Pool and Tennis were \$20 per year. Today the cost is approximately 400% more. It is easy to say things have changed from pro-resident to pro-money, but the analogies smack more of business fundamentals trumping our quality of life.

The head scratching continues. Has government grown to service the needs of the voting residents, or has government grown to service the needs of the revenue generating tourist industry? Tony Kennon has successfully inflated the bureaucracy, completely

## Breaking Promises in Orange Beach

overlooked cuts on property tax in an era of prosperity (4 mills). Residents and businesses could use a little love.

Orange Beach does not have a caucus of conservative minds, canvassing for better leadership (<https://alabamaleadership.org/>). We see a Facebook Group against the Flyover Bridge west of the Foley Beach Express (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/155706324781200/>), and a Facebook Group against the proposed Wolf Bay Bridge near Doc's (<https://www.facebook.com/nobaybridge/>). These do not ensure change.

Transformation needs a plan, and a political voice. Conservatism "favors tradition in the face of external forces for change," according to a report on Philosophy Basics ([https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch\\_conservatism.html](https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_conservatism.html)).

Encouraging more financial prospectors to make speculative investments in Orange Beach is truly an "external force for change". Our leaders are content, moving the goal posts, accommodating real estate developments with setback variances.

The mask is off the long-term plan. The size of government is directly proportional to the number of developments.

As proof, subdivision planning has become more aggressive. "A main point of concern raised [by Council] about the subdivision [Broken Sound PUD, Lauder Lane and Pelican Place] itself was in reference to the small setbacks proposed for the development [40 lots]. For RS zoning [residential], front setbacks are a minimum of 30 feet, rear setbacks at least 20 feet and side setbacks require 10 feet. For Broken Sound, the setbacks are set at 18 feet in the front, 8 feet in the rear and 5 feet on the sides," according to a report by Crystal Cole/ Islander Editor in Gulf Coast News Today (<http://www.gulfcoastnewstoday.com/stories/orange-beach-approves-new-development-red-light,74577>).

Short-term rentals will not be allowed in this subdivision. "A condition of the Broken Sound PUD approval was that house rentals shall not be less than six months," according to a report by the City Clerk's Office in an email.

Mayor Kennon explained his thinking, approving this housing project (See Image 1), "They're going to have to have X number of units to financially make that work, and it's going to have to be close. In my opinion, even though these are extremely small setbacks and we all [Council Members] have our problems with that, the alternative project of apartments or more townhomes to me was a greater evil," according to a report by Crystal Cole/ Islander Editor in Gulf Coast News Today (<http://www.gulfcoastnewstoday.com/stories/orange-beach-approves-new-development-red-light,74577>).

Tony's logic is business centric, speaking volumes. I argue, we will wake up one morning, wondering how we missed the setback apocalypse.

Image 1: Broken Sound Subdivision (PUD) with 5 ft. side setbacks

## Breaking Promises in Orange Beach



Image courtesy of The Islander (<http://www.gulfcoastnewstoday.com/stories/orange-beach-approves-new-development-red-light,74577>)

Some are in opposition to stripping away city planning standards, but there is fear of mayoral retribution. Having bones of contention is an unspoken violation.

Last cycle, one council member had a vision for better governance, breaking ranks, declaring a much-anticipated candidacy for Tony's job. The candidate was immediately uninvited from the council's internal meetings and discussions, according to sources familiar with the events. Such retribution, "is used to discourage future behavior," according to people who spoke on the condition of anonymity. I assume Mayor Kennon has already found someone to challenge this malcontent in the 2020 election cycle.

Not everyone complains about Kennon's brand of real-estate conservatism. To his credit Mayor Kennon purchased and renovated the Event Center, painted to look like the hotel next door, appearing from the bridge to be part of the same brand-name entity, making it easier to rent out. He also rebuilt the crumbling Art Center from the ruins of the old Orange Beach Hotel, presently offering classes in glassblowing and pottery, with rental facilities for conferences, and weddings.

Proposing actual bridges across the canal, adding more lanes to the roads, and approving inessential developments does not contradict conservative principles. "Conservatism is as much a matter of temperament as of doctrine. It may sometimes even accompany left-wing [liberal] politics or economics," according to a report in Encyclopedia Britannica (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/conservatism/General-characteristics>).

## Breaking Promises in Orange Beach

You see, conservatism as a pillar of small government is a matter of perception. Whether you want to hold onto the old ways in the traditional manner, or embrace the new-found wealth from developments and rentals. The choice is yours.

I am not arguing for massive layoffs of Orange Beach's dedicated employees, just to make the government smaller. I argue for an explanation to voters as to why the 2008 promise of small government was broken.

ENDS.

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