

GREG KISELA

It takes a special person to handle the constant challenges facing a city manager—many do it well. But, to actually *thrive* in that balancing act, to juggle so many conflicting demands with continued zest and enthusiasm, diplomacy and good will, foresight, creativity, and collaboration takes a *very* rare individual. Gregory A. Kisela, City Manager of Destin, Florida since 2004, is that man, whose personal qualities and values are transforming his organization and city.

Greg's experience in municipal government began in 1976 at the City of Moore Haven, Florida, as the Superintendent of Water Plant Operations. He moved to the private sector where he became the vice president of the largest privately-owned water and wastewater utility in the state. In 1991, the City of Fort Lauderdale hired Kisela as Utilities Director, and subsequently as Assistant City Manager.

"It may seem that moving from a large metropolitan South Florida community to a smaller coastal community would have little in common, but that is not the case," says Kisela. "Destin is undergoing the same big city growing pains that South Florida experienced years ago but at a much smaller scale."

Greg brings a wealth of real-world experience to Destin, and views all City challenges enthusiastically-- not as problems but as opportunities for improvement or creative problem-solving. His attitude is reflected through his leadership style. During the past year, Kisela has empowered all City employees with the tools and resources needed to undertake a massive continuous quality improvement process.



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This started with a staff-initiated internal climate survey of all employees and an external customer satisfaction survey to determine what was working and what needed improvement. With the goal of organizational excellence and obtaining the Sterling Award over the next several years, this initiative is comprised of process-driven teams that focus on enhancing customer service. He's given staff time to meet, brought in facilitators, endorsed the training of two senior managers as Florida Sterling examiners, and encouraged a "bottom up" approach to change. Greg's dedication to this innovative way of doing business in government is bringing fresh ideas and programs that benefit service deliveries to Destin's residents, businesses, and visitors.

Under Kisela's can-do guidance, over the last year the City has tackled some of Destin's long-standing and recurring problems. Greg was able to finally push the "GO" button on the City's first beach restoration project. It took more than eight years, five lawsuits, and thousands of hours of meetings, to restore two miles of Destin's beaches. Thanks to Kisela's persistence, beachgoers now have 80 to 100 more feet of sugar-white beach where previously critical erosion was threatening Destin's shoreline and economic vitality. The new beach has been selected as one of the nation's best restored beaches for 2008.

Greg dealt at the same time with the on-going problem of securing funding for maintenance dredging of Destin's East Pass. East Pass, an outlet of the



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Choctawhatchee Bay into the Gulf of Mexico is the lifeblood of Destin's fishing fleet and recreational boaters throughout the entire region. In 2007, the City Council requested the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) to dredge the navigation channel and place the sand on a spoil site adjacent to some critically eroded beach. Although the Corps had a dredging permit for the project, it didn't authorize the work until Destin secured a \$229,000 federal earmark in 2008. Greg spearheaded this grueling political and "red tape" process, and coordinated on all levels with many agencies to ultimately clear the channel for Destin's charter fleet and replenish nearly 60,000 cubic yards of beach-quality sand for use on our most eroded beachfront. Hundreds of beachfront property owners now have an added degree of protection from this year's hurricane season until a planned beach restoration is constructed in 2009.

During the same period, the City was implementing its first community redevelopment project in the heart of Destin to initiate the first multi-modal transportation district that was approved in the State of Florida. This project invested almost \$15 million dollars in sidewalk, landscaping, pathway and roadway improvements in the downtown of Destin. In addition to undergrounding the utilities, the City installed a state of the art stormwater system to improve the quality of the water that discharged to our waterways. Kisela is not afraid to think or operate "outside the box" to improve the quality of life in our community.



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2008
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ENTRY

Greg will tell you these projects weren't easy, particularly at a time when we were facing huge budget challenges. We will tell you that it is Greg's relentless energy, tact, ability to build partnerships, and his win-win approach to problem-solving that makes Greg successful time and again in resolving the unique problems that face our city. These skills have allowed us to voluntarily annex 100 acres of property over the past several years.

Due to Greg Kisela's foresight and leadership, the City of Destin began downsizing and tightening its budget as early as October 2006. Since that time, nine positions that became vacant were not filled. Greg also instituted in the spring of 2008 a "voluntary lay-off" program that produced an incentive for employees considering retirement or a job change to leave the City by June with some added benefits. Three employees took advantage of the incentives. As a result, unlike other municipalities, no involuntary lay-offs or reductions in level of service need be considered in 2009 for the City of Destin. And, this is a city with a 1.455 millage rate!

Greg's greatest asset, perhaps, is his ability to inspire those around him to emulate his capabilities. Recently, following several years of intense hurricane activity, the problem of four abandoned and derelict boats in our emerald green waterways became an issue. Greg patiently guided his code enforcement staff through the very rigid and time-consuming state derelict vessel statutes with success. Then, without resources to hire a salvage company, he asked Public Works (PW) to



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remove the boats. Though several employees had some experience in necessary fields, none had ever raised derelict vessels. Creative problem-solving by a determined PW crew donned with scuba gear, air bags, 55 gallon drums, rope, air compressors, pumps, a small boat, and a back hoe led to the removal of the eyesores. The crew modeled their city manager's can-do behavior and, like their boss, succeeded!

Greg actively participates in this community to make it better. On any given day, you can find him being a "weigh master" for the youth fishing contest, playing Santa for a convalescent home, grilling burgers at Destin Open House, or acting as an honorary military commander with Eglin Air Force Base. He is a Rotarian, a board member of the local YMCA, and a member of ICMA. He spends countless hours making sure that Destin is the world-class, family-friendly place our community demands. Most importantly, he is **always** available to citizens and staff.

Truly, Greg Kisela represents the best of the best. It is an honor for the City of Destin to nominate Greg Kisela for the Florida League of Cities Excellence Award for the 2008 City Manager of the Year.

Word count: 1,179

