

Jacksonville City Council Candidate Survey 2019



Threats to the St. Johns River's Health

The *State of the River Report for the Lower St. Johns River Basin* has scientifically tracked and assessed key health indicators for the St. Johns River over the last 11 years. Major findings in 2018 include:

- Wetlands continue to be lost to development, resulting in a loss of crucial ecosystem functions including the assimilation of pollutants, minimization of local flooding, and fish habitat;
- Salinity continues to increase, negatively impacting submerged grasses and the aquatic life that depends on it;
- Invasive species are on the rise, connected to port activity and impacts from storms.

The health of the St. Johns River also continues to be adversely impacted by:

- fecal coliform bacteria pollution from failing septic tanks, leaking sewage pipes, sanitary sewer overflows (SSO's), and animal waste;
- nutrient pollution from wastewater and industrial discharges, failing septic tanks, fertilizer runoff, and upstream impacts like biosolids that trigger algal blooms and fish kills;
- rising water levels from climate change that increase the likelihood of flooding;
- dredging that increases salinity, destroys wetlands, and causes river levels to increase;
- sedimentation from streets, storm drains and construction-site runoff.

1. *What do you consider the most significant threats to the health of the St. Johns River? What do you specifically plan to do to address these problems, if elected?*

The proposed deepening of the channel without mitigating for the negative effects (if that can even actually be done) and fertilizer runoff and discharge from septic systems in low-lying areas.

Regarding channel deepening, without real protections for the river's health, I can vote "no" to provide funding for the city required match. I would work to improve our landscape ordinance to expand no-fertilizer buffer zones along shorelines and not approve zoning changes that would allow expansion of septic systems in low-lying areas.

Rising Waters

As demonstrated by Hurricane Irma and the historic flooding that occurred, Jacksonville is more vulnerable than ever before. Decades of dredging the St. Johns and sea level rise have resulted in higher water levels and storm surge in our river and greater risk from flooding.

Locally, the Northeast Florida Regional Council has recommended that we plan for rising waters of 1' - 3' by 2060 and 3' - 6' by 2110. Scientists are also predicting slower, wetter, and more intense storms, further increasing the risk to low-lying communities like ours.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects that the current plan to deepen the river from 40' to 47' will increase water levels in the river by an additional 3 – 8 inches and by up to 12% during smaller, "high frequency" storms. This dredging project will cost nearly \$700 million with an uncertain return on

investment for local taxpayers. During your term in office, you could be asked to appropriate as much as \$150 million to the project.

Many of Jacksonville's competing cities are aggressively developing and implementing action plans to make their communities more resilient and better equipped to deal with a future of rising waters.

2. *Would you support the creation of a Chief Resiliency Officer position? What other measures do you think are necessary to create a more resilient Jacksonville?*

Possibly. It depends on what the job responsibilities are and how the occupant of that position is selected. I am generally not in favor of adding more layers of government. We already have a robust organizational chart of people and departments in Public Works and Planning and Development. These are the departments that are supposed to have the planning and infrastructure expertise to address resiliency. We also have a strong mayor form of government where the mayor can and should address the mission and deal with any departmental silos and infighting that often occur within government. A Chief Resiliency Officer under our form of city government would most likely not have any more authority than the above referenced department heads or individuals and could end up get in the way. Positions such as this are often set up to deflect responsibility from where it really resides.

3. *Do you support dredging the St. Johns River from 40-47ft. and contributing significant local tax dollars to the project? If so, would you also support adequate funding to mitigate the damage to the river and low-lying communities that may experience additional flooding?*

The port of Jacksonville is a vital economic engine for our region and in order to remain competitive we must invest in infrastructure improvements. The St. Johns River is also a vital regional asset both from an economic and ecological perspective. The number one priority is to protect the health of the river. Once dredging is done, it cannot be undone. One very serious flaw in the current proposal is no plans to mitigate for ecological damage that would be caused by dredging. This is unacceptable.

The economics of the plan are also questionable. Jacksonville's portion of the cost will be in the neighborhood of \$250-\$300 million, and historically, early estimates for these types of projects have been woefully short. Information regarding the economic return projections has also been very limited. The state of the shipping industry is still in a great state of flux worldwide and according to people in the shipping industry to whom I have spoken the number of post-Panamax ships is limited. Getting shipping lines to change distribution patterns and relocate from places where they have already made very large investments will be difficult at best.

If a real case can be made that dredging can be done and still protect the health of the river, provide an economic return to the community, and not take resources away from other very vital capital improvement needs, then it should be done. This is a tall order that I do not believe can be met.

Wetlands Loss

One of the best ways to prevent flooding is to protect our wetlands and marshes. These areas act as natural sponges that trap and slowly release rain and flood waters, while serving as buffers during major storm events. In addition, wetlands are the kidneys of our river, filtering pollutants from runoff in urban areas. They are also nurseries for fish spawning and a food source for almost every species, directly or indirectly, in our river. Wetlands are critical, yet we continue to allow wetlands and marshes to be destroyed or altered, resulting in a loss of critical biological services for our community and natural systems.

4. ***Some counties, such as Alachua, have adopted enhanced wetland protections. Would you support enhanced local wetland protections to reduce the loss of wetlands in Duval County, such as larger buffer and more stringent mitigation requirements?***

Yes

Treating Stormwater

Stormwater runoff is a major cause of water pollution in Jacksonville, carrying fertilizer, pesticides, hydrocarbons, and other pollutants into our waterways. Many communities across the country are turning to Low Impact Development (LID) practices and Green Infrastructure (GI) to protect our waterways, such as bioswales, rain gardens, urban trees, created wetlands, and green roofs. During your time in office, Jacksonville will be required to further reduce nutrient pollution in the St. Johns based on the Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) nutrient reduction requirements for its Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4) permit from the FDEP. However, our community has not made adequate progress in reducing these pollutants since 2015, and may once again look to purchase trading credits to meet our its obligations, instead of investing in pollution reduction projects.

5. ***What, if anything, would you do to encourage or require Low Impact Development and Green Infrastructure to treat and manage stormwater in Jacksonville?***

The best place for an individual council member to have influence here is through land use and zoning. Jacksonville uses the PUD process extensively and developers must get council approval for changes. As an architect, I can help developers understand the benefits of LID if they are not familiar with the concept and I can encourage the use of LID as a condition of support for proposed changes.

6. ***Would you support investing in projects that will allow us to further reduce nutrient loading into the St. Johns, or buying credits to meet the City's BMAP and permit requirements?***

I do support investing in projects that will result in reduced nutrient loading into the river. I do not support credit purchases. That is an administrative/accounting move that does not change anything.

Tributary Restoration

Restoring the natural flow of the many tributaries of the St. Johns will remove toxic sediments, restore vegetation and habitat, and enable them to absorb floodwaters. In addition, restoration will make the tributaries more accessible to recreational boating and provide habitat for fisheries. Tributary restoration could also be a critical part of Jacksonville's resiliency strategy and offset some of the negative impacts of the Deep Dredge and sea level rise.

7. ***Would you support a comprehensive plan to restore tributaries to the St. Johns River in Duval County?***

Yes

Septic Tanks

There are up to 90,000 septic tanks located throughout Duval County. Many of these systems are failing, contributing to high fecal coliform bacteria levels and nutrient pollution problems in our tributaries. The City of Jacksonville and its partners are required under two Basin Management Action Plans

(BMAPs) to reduce fecal coliform counts in twenty-five of the most severely impaired tributaries in the Lower Basin of the St. Johns River. The BMAPs include obligations to phase out the failing septic tanks contributing to the impairment of these tributaries. However, the BMAPs do not include all of the septic tanks that are potentially failing throughout Jacksonville. Despite the significant problem posed by failing septic tanks, over 1,000 new systems have been permitted in Duval County in the last 5 years.

8. *What will you do to address this serious ongoing problem of failing septic tanks and to ensure that the City can fulfill its BMAP obligations for the tributaries?*

What needs to happen is to expand of our sanitary utility and phase out septic systems.

Unfortunately, there is very little any one council member can do to accomplish this. Tools that are available, of which I will use, are to publicly advocate for funding to expand our sewer system and to vote against zoning and land use changes that would allow large development in low-lying areas without utility service.

9. *Do you think Duval County should allow permits for new septic tanks, or require the use of performance-based treatment systems?*

It depends on the location. I am not familiar with the specifics of performance-based treatment systems and have not had them used for any of my projects. What I have read about them leads me to believe that, while they perform much better than conventional septic systems, they are probably much more expensive. Conventional septic systems perform fine in certain upland areas. They should not be used in low-lying areas near waterways, flood plains, and the like. If one builds in environmentally sensitive areas and utility service is not available, one should expect to build a sanitary system to higher standards.