

# 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 to be 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?***

**Failing septic tanks and old ash sites polluting our tributaries, salinity, storm water runoff (nutrients) and lack of resilience preparation.**

**The city should have comprehensive view and begin a continuous monitoring of the overall health of the St. Johns River, its tributaries, wetlands and riparian lands including a review of the city environmental and land-use policies that affect the river. There should be a special Committee of the city council to initiate this important work. It should include the key stakeholders and address the issue of stewardship. The studies have been done, the job now is to execute solutions. In the past, the City has made progress, and it can again but it will take leadership and capital. It will also take more than just local funding. The committee I propose must be aggressive in applying for state, Water Management District, federal and other funding sources. We should look at foundation grants to help fund a septic tank removal program for removal of failing septic tanks. We need solutions for storm water runoff, the dredging of silt filled tributaries and waterways. Dredging these waters to their original depths that would help with salinity issues, flood abatement, and making them usable once again. Included would also be the toxic cleanup of the "Emerald Necklace". When the water quality is improved, word will spread quickly. The river will be more welcoming and usable, and the payoff will be a priceless asset for future generations.**

## **Rising Waters**

As demonstrated by Hurricane Irma's historic flooding, Jacksonville is more vulnerable than we thought. Decades of dredging the St. Johns, the silting of tributaries and sea level rise have resulted in higher water levels, putting us at risk of storm surge, increasing our risk of wide spread flooding.

The Northeast Florida Regional Council has recommended 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?***

**Yes, see below**

***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?***

**I have studied several reports and analyses, spoken with people on both sides of the issue and have concluded I will support the Port's plan to dredge the river to 47 feet. Our Port is a major economic driver of jobs in Jacksonville. In order to sustain our growing market share of international business, we must be able to compete and that means a deeper dredge. That said, I am not convinced the mitigation currently contemplated by the Corps of Engineers is adequate to protect the St Johns River. Getting mitigation for the dredge right is important. But perhaps more important and long term is to understand the overall health of the River, and this means a comprehensive look at the river, its tributaries, wetlands and riparian uplands. This should include reviewing city environmental and land use policies that affect the River. I have begun pressing for next year's City Council leadership to take immediate action on this important work.**

## **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.

- 3. 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?***

**I have always supported the protection of wetlands. I worked for the protections of wetlands during the permitting process of the Goodby's Creek boat ramp. I will look at all options for protection, including buffers and mitigation requirements. Wet lands are valuable for drainage, resilience as well as filtering pollution. I was extremely involved in saving the Julington / Durbin creek peninsular and the Better Jax Preservation project. I also led efforts for the city to obtain Cedar Point with the old State CARL money.**

## **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.

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

**I would be open to viewing all options to find the best fit in Jacksonville. (Also see my answer below)**

- 5. 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 have never liked purchasing trading credits to meet obligations. Perhaps there's a place for this but I think we need to manage and treat our storm water in a direct manner. There are so many issues revolving around the St. Johns River from resilience, managing storm water, nutrients, and septic tank remediation that it is going to take a fully funded and coordinated effort to execute what we already know. I want an aggressive approach obtaining dollars, I will take action to address these issues head on and not with obscure credits.**

## **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.

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

**A big 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 been permitted in Duval County in the last 5 years.

**7. 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?**

**I have obtained and studied JEA maps of the areas where our septic tanks are failing. Within my first weeks after my election and before taking office, I will seek the advice and counsel of the city, JEA, and professionals to help layout a plan and determine where we need to start first. Once that has been established, I will begin to seek out funding to quickly execute the removal of failing septic tanks. A very important part of the solution will include making it affordable for the owners of homes with failing septic tanks to hook up to the JEA sewer lines. Affordability is the key to success**

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

**I do not believe the city should shut down new permits for septic tanks in areas that are installed properly, meet environmental standards and are not a threat to our waterways. I am open to the idea of performance-based treatment systems but would like to know more about how they work and what they cost.**

### **Concluding comments:**

**The questions above require answers with specific answers with more technical detailed answers with regards to the health of Saint Johns River and our resiliency strategies, as they should. I would also like to add that if we are able to execute the solutions to these problems we will make the St. Johns River a friendlier place to enjoy recreation, which is a huge part of our quality of life. From just boating, kayaking and fishing to just enjoying sunsets a healthy river enhances all of this. This is the retail of the detail above!**