

# 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?***

***Rather than identify the most significant threat I prefer to focus on the root causes for three of the five issues itemized that we can impact, as policy makers and funding appropriators...failing septic tanks, leaking sewage pipes, storm drain and construction-site runoff. If elected I would champion efforts to:***

- a) Set a reasonable four-year target for eliminating those septic tanks that have been proven to directly impact the health of the river and appropriate the necessary funding to assist families and neighborhoods in eliminating them.***
- b) Work with JEA in setting aside a portion of its revenue to repair and replace failing sewage pipes.***
- c) Educate homeowners as to how they can modify the storm grates near them so as to capture more of the residue coming off our streets. (I have personally done so (see attached photo and after each rainfall I am able to capture the majority of leaves and other debris before they find their way into our retention pond.)***
- d) Ensure proposed new development uses state of the art practices for managing sewage, especially in near proximity of waterways.***

## **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?***

***Creating yet another government job may not be the solution. I would prefer that we hold JFRD's Emergency Preparedness Division responsible to be more proactive in its effort to address our resiliency issues.***

***As to other measures...I presently serve on the Risk Assessment Sub-Committee of the JFRD's Emergency Preparedness Division's Local Mitigation Strategy Advisory Committee. The role of the committee is to assist JFRD in the development of its five-year mitigation plan which is to be submitted to the state and federal government in 2020 in order to qualify for future mitigation funding. Our first task has been to develop surveys so as to engage the general public and associated stakeholders. The final draft of both surveys will be presented at our next meeting. In addition to personally inviting other citizens, organizations such as Groundworks and the executives of some companies who have expertise in civil engineering to join the sub-committee, I have actively encouraged the hosting of townhall meetings so as to engage citizens in this work. (I think it would be good for a member of the Riverkeeper organization be a part of this sub-committee. The next meeting is scheduled for Friday, March 1<sup>st</sup> @ 1:30 pm on the 4<sup>th</sup> Floor of the Jacksonville Emergency Operations Center - 515 N. Julia Street, 4th Floor.) So as to the “other measure,” I think what is necessary is for greater citizen involvement with the City agencies already doing this work (the COJ Neighborhoods Department in addition to JFRD).***

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?***

***As I understand it the dredging decision, for all intents and purposes, has already been cast what with the appropriations of state and federal funds, the commitment of additional funding from the state by then Governor Scott and the awarding of contracts by the Army Corps of Engineers. The City's responsibility at this point should not be to contribute dollars to the project, rather to inevitable mitigation issues that will arise from it. That said the Council still needs to ask critical questions regarding costs to the city of the total project, who assumes responsibility for cost over runs, understand the efficacy of the project to produce jobs compared to other job creating initiatives the city could fund, and the city's portion of the cost relative to other high dollar projects in the pipeline and those being considered.***

## **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?***

***Certainly, I would look to be a champion in terms of not only educating the public as to its role in all this and would not be in favor of trading credits.***

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?***

***Yes, regarding the appropriate investments but no with respect to permitting the purchasing of 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.

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?***

***I refer you to my first response to Question 1. of this questionnaire.***

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

***History has taught that septic tanks are not a viable long-term solution. At this point we need to adopt the policy of requiring the use of performance-based treatment systems.***