

# 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?***

The two largest problems confronting our environment are the threat to our neighborhoods posed by climate change and the health of the St. Johns River and its tributaries. These issues are inescapably linked and must be addressed together.

First, climate change is established science. I have worked at Google for more than a decade. The collection and the dispassionate analysis of data should be guiding our decision-making processes and public policy. Those who debate this make a concerted choice to ignore data in favor of political considerations or profit. Jacksonville needs to be investing in infrastructure projects that will protect our most vulnerable communities, not exacerbating those issues. Even those who question the science cannot dispute that we have areas that flood when we get heavy rains or even an especially high tide. We will see these changes in our lifetime and we must do what we can to protect our children and grandchildren from bearing the cost of the mistakes of our past.

Dredging, failing septic tanks, arsenic, lead, petroleum-related laced soil, industrial operations contributing pesticide and fertilizer -- these are only some of the contaminants polluting our urban core tributaries. Every day, these poisons are affecting

our water quality, decreasing our quality of life and posing a direct threat to public health.

These issues -- the issue of clean water and a city focused on addressing the long term issues of our climate -- are not Republican or Democratic. We must be united to address the environmental challenges we face. I have focused my campaign around looking at our long term sustainability and resilience and these issues figure prominently.

## **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?***

I have stated publicly that I would make the creation of Chief Resiliency Officer my first piece of legislation. Ideally it would not be a political appointment in order to provide long term continuity. Additionally, I’ve centered this campaign around infrastructure investment designed to create a stronger Jacksonville from the ground up - including dealing with drainage and flooding issues in our neighborhoods and taking steps to underground our utilities and get our neighbors on to the city sewer and off septic tanks.

### ***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?***

I do not support the dredging of the St. Johns River to support Jaxport expansion. Further, the economically and environmentally correct approach to the future of our river does not involve deep water dredging. I have not seen any data suggesting this is good for the health of our river or any

guarantees these impacts will be mitigated. The St. Johns Riverkeeper has stated the among all the overstated economic benefits to our regions that dredging will increase the salinity of the river, threaten wildlife, increase local flooding (already increasing from sea level rise), and other considerations not properly studied by the Army Corp of Engineers. Additional studies detail the environmental significance and economic importance of our American Heritage designated river. We must be proactive in restoring the health of our river as well as protecting our river from future shortsighted actions not supported by science. Deep water dredging is not consistent with that approach.

Jacksonville would benefit both economically and environmental by becoming the East Coast's premier medium sized port. Studies have been completed suggesting Small and Medium Sized ports (SMP's) can become hubs for sustainable energy companies. Further SMP cities, especially Jacksonville, can use their existing ports to develop niche markets that do not want or need to be located in large ports.

## **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?***

Wetlands are a key piece of our amazing ecosystem in Northeast Florida. Protecting these vital habitats is essential to protecting our quality of life here, and I am supportive of taking action to ensure we are protecting and restoring our wetlands where it is possible.

## **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?***

We must work with developers to incorporate these types of LID and GI practices into new projects. The first step is to identify best-practice examples (either in Jacksonville or other cities) that demonstrate how these features can be both good for our environment and good for developers (both because they're physically beautiful--bioswales, gardens, trees, green roofs, etc.--and because they can help make their projects more easily rentable/sellable. Then we need to look at how we begin to incorporate asking questions about these approaches in our development and permitting processes.

**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?***

In reality, we're probably going to need to do both, but to only buy credits, as the City has been doing, does not create the right set of incentives for the future. We should develop a plan to wean ourselves off of (or at least reduce) the purchasing of credits, and increase our investments in projects that address stormwater issues. It won't happen overnight, but we need to get started.

## **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, where we can restore the flow and recreate the natural filters while improving our quality of life, we should. Working with groups like Groundwork Jax can help turn these tributaries into valuable places for public recreation and add to the beauty of our region. This isn't just good environmental policy, it's good city planning.

## **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?***

We must fulfill the promises of the past 50 years and get our neighbors off septic. We need a strategic plan to get move off reliance of septic systems, including new funding mechanisms to assist with this process.

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

No, again we should be proactive about finding creative funding sources, including clean water and preparedness dollars, to help get people off septic and we should not be exacerbating the issue by permitting new ones, except in areas where it truly cannot be avoided.