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**JACKSONVILLE WATERWAYS COMMISSION
River Accord Task Force**

Meeting Minutes

May 10th, 2024 10:30 a.m.

Location: Lynwood Roberts Room, 1st floor, City Hall

In attendance: Council Member Jimmy Peluso (Chair); Commissioner Richard Redick; Lisa Rinaman, St. Johns Riverkeeper; Shannon MacGillis, Office of the General Counsel; Adam Hoyles, Ex-Officio Member; Cori Hermle, St. Johns River Water Management District; Dr. Gerry Pinto, Jacksonville University; Hai Vu, JEA; Brian Burket, Waterfront Project Manager; Melissa Long, Chief of Environmental Quality; James Richardson, Environmental Protection Board Administrator; Dr. Quinton White, Jacksonville University

Also: Brooks Dame, Executive Council Assistant; Ed Cordova, JEA; Shay Hill, JEA; Fara Ilami, Northeast Florida Regional Council; Eamon Webb, Council Research

Meeting Convened: 10:32 a.m.

Council Member Peluso called the meeting to order. He stated that the new River Accord document would not be completed in the next five weeks or likely before the Council year was finished at the end of June; however, he stated that he would like to see the Task Force work before the Council year was finished to include goals, specific projects, and policy recommendations to pass to the next JWC and to the administration.

Lisa Rinaman, St. Johns Riverkeeper, explained various goals that she would like to see included in the River Accord document: a specific focus on decreasing fecal coliform bacteria levels in tributaries, greater resources for septic tank phase out programs and pipe replacement efforts, a reevaluation of fertilizer ordinances currently on the books, and coordination with regional and upstream stakeholders. Council Member Peluso stated that he liked these topics and added that he would like to see these efforts implemented in the River Accord document with specific and measurable goals so that future Councils could understand whether the City was making progress in accomplishing its goals. He explained that many of the issues that the river faces today are the same as those that the river faced in 2006 but that measuring success or failure was a weakness of the previous River Accord.

Ms. Rinaman noted that it is frequently pointed out that there is less collaboration among regional stakeholders in the St. Johns River Basin than there is among stakeholders in other regional waterways. Council Member Peluso asked who generally oversees sewer maintenance in other counties, and Cori Hermle, St. Johns River Water Management District, answered these projects are generally overseen by municipalities.

Council Member Peluso asked whether JEA had prepared a list of recommendations for the River Accord for this meeting. Hai Vu, Vice President of Water & Wastewater Systems for JEA, answered that they had not yet but would within the next two weeks.

Commissioner Redick explained several policy recommendations that he would like included in the River Accord. He explained that he was bothered by a development at Pumpkin Hill Creek Preserve, as it was not required in the permitting process to show the estimated effect of run-off after the stripping of the land. He added that he would like to see greater focus on preserving the shoreline in the new River Accord; the JWC could integrate existing resiliency standards into the River Accord. Adam Hoyles, ex-officio member, stated that nutrient loading was typically factored into project considerations by Basin Management Action Plan stakeholders and that dock projects typically do not negatively impact shorelines. Commissioner Redick stated that he was concerned about a specific project near Mayport, as a University of Georgia study had shown that the City is not doing enough to stabilize the shoreline there. Mr. Hoyles stated that the area near Mayport is a high-energy shoreline and that he did not think the dock project there would make a significant impact on the shoreline there. Brian Burket said that he was familiar with the University of Georgia study, that the Parks, Recreation, and Community Services Department would take it into consideration in future projects, and that future projects presented opportunities to install living shorelines where possible. Dr. Gerry Pinto of Jacksonville University seconded the idea of dock projects being potential opportunities to install living shorelines. Commissioner Redick explained that he believes there to be some trade-off between increasing public access through development and maintaining the shoreline, and he stated that this trade-off should be explicitly noted in the River Accord document.

Council Member Peluso stated that he liked the policy recommendations; he stated that many of these issues are likely already considered by various stakeholders in the permitting/regulatory process but that the River Accord could highlight areas in which these processes could be improved. Commissioner Redick noted that the effects of upstream activity should be considered in the River Accord document, and Council Member Peluso stated that Ms. Rinaman had been making this point across Task Force meetings.

Dr. Gerry Pinto of Jacksonville University stated that the State of the River Report involved efforts from both the University of North Florida and Jacksonville University, so both universities should be credited when the report is referenced.

Council Member Peluso explained that Commissioner Richard Hartley had submitted recommendations. He explained that Commissioner Hartley felt the City needs a public education campaign regarding the harms of specific behaviors, believing that many people do not understand that fertilizer that they use to maintain their lawns goes directly into the river. Council Member Peluso asked Melissa Long, Chief of Environmental Quality, whether such an educational program already existed, and Ms. Long responded that it did not. Ms. Long stated that there was an ordinance regarding fertilizer usage but that the ordinance could be confusing to constituents. Ms. Rinaman asked whether the SJRWMD tracked whether specific counties had fertilizer ordinances on the books, and Ms. Hermle stated that it does not but that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection might. Ms. Long added that many grant applications from the state award extra points to municipalities for having fertilizer ordinances.

Mr. Hoyles explained that many constituents who own property on the water prioritize their own aesthetic priorities over the health of the river. He stated that he liked the idea of an educational campaign, adding that it could move the needle, as individual behavior is a large source of pollution in the river. Dr. Pinto stated that SJRWMD had a good educational program on the effect of individual behavior on the river; he added that many people's perceptions of what is "natural" is warped by idealized visions of what their lawn should look like.

Ms. Rinaman described a policy elsewhere where pictures of non-complying lawns would be taken and mailed to the address when severe algae blooms occurred. Council Member Peluso reiterated that a marketing campaign would be a good idea, noting that a social media campaign would be relatively cheap compared to other efforts. He stated that the City could also involve Duval County Public Schools in its educational efforts.

Dr. Pinto stated that the River Accord should focus on biosolids as well as nutrient levels. Council Member Peluso agreed and added that he would like the Task Force to develop specific metrics to judge success or failure and that he would be relying on the subject matter experts on the Task Force to develop these specific goals. Mrs. Rinaman stated that most biosolids issues are caused by upstream considerations. Council Member Peluso stated that the River Accord document could address issues that the Task Force believes to be caused by upstream activities in policy recommendations targeted to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Commissioner Redick noted that the Environmental Protection Board was working on a list of "impaired streams" and asked whether the Environmental Quality Division anticipated that it would have a role in the River Accord document. Ms. Long stated that she had not considered its inclusion. James Richardson, Environmental Protection Board Administrator, stated that EPB efforts would support the River Accord but did not believe that the River Accord would include such specific information as what would be included in this list. Ms. Long added that prioritization of impaired streams would sort streams by bacteria levels.

Council Member Peluso continued to read recommendations submitted by Commissioner Hartley. Commissioner Hartley submitted that the Council should set as a goal the installation of two additional artificial reefs. Ms. Long stated that there are already two installed in the river system and that there were many issues to consider regarding whether a specific location would be suitable for the installation of an additional reef. Dr. Quinton White of Jacksonville University explained that the two major considerations in the installation of artificial reefs were salinity levels and the state of the river floor. He explained that the current artificial reefs were hurt by the impacts of Hurricane Irma, as the storm had affected salinity levels. He stated that the City had considered installing an additional reef closer to the mouth of the river, as the salinity there would support a reef, but that this project had never moved beyond the idea stage.

Council Member Peluso asked how long it would take to install an artificial reef, and Dr. White answered that if construction on a reef were to begin now, it would take roughly four years to complete. Council Member Peluso asked who is responsible for the maintenance of these reefs, and Dr. White stated that they are largely maintained by the Coastal Conservation Association (“CCA”). Council Member Peluso stated that he would not want to put a date on recommendations for reef projects considering the uncertainty of where they could be installed and how long construction would take. He asked how the initial reef projects were funded, and Dr. White stated that they were funded through a combination of CCA funds and through private donations. Ms. Rinaman asked Dr. White if he had any recommendations for the River Accord document, and Dr. White stated that he was currently digesting the conversation and could have these conversations in the future.

Council Member Peluso asked whether sea grass installation could be recommended in the River Accord document, noting that the Alvin Brown mayoral administration had seen it as a way to mitigate flooding and shoreline loss. Dr. Pinto explained that the sea grass has disappeared for a reason and that salinity levels have contributed to the loss of sea grass. He noted that the state had implemented measures to keep predators away from sea grass as a way to slowly bring it back; Ms. Rinaman further explained these protective enclosures that kept manatees and other predators of sea grass out of sea grass habitats to reduce grazing pressures. She stated that it was unsure whether these strategies would work further downstream with higher salinity levels. Dr. Pinto noted that there were many factors that had led to the loss of sea grass and that the reduction of grazing pressure had shown potential as a way of giving the sea grass a more positive environment in which it could slowly return, with the eventual goal of these enclosures being opened back up to all wildlife.

Ms. Rinaman stated that neighborhood-level concerns and plans should be considered in the River Accord document, noting that the Ribault/Moncrief area had been deemed vulnerable as a low-lying, flood-prone area by the Army Corps of Engineers. She stated that living shorelines projects could be one potential option for the City to mitigate these potential harms.

Council Member Peluso stated that the next River Accord Task Force meeting would be held on Thursday, 5/23/2024 at 9:00 AM.

Council Member Peluso stated that the goals for yearly decreases of certain indicators should be realistic; the Task Force should be ambitious with its goals but also not set the City up for failure in the future. Ms. Rinaman emphasized that fecal coliform bacteria should be included as an indicator. Ms. Long noted that

this indicator would apply specifically to tributaries, as fecal coliform bacteria levels are concerningly high in tributaries but not in the mainstem of the river.

Dr. Pinto explained that various homeowners' associations operate in their own "silos" independently of one another; he asked whether the Task Force could consider policy recommendations that would encourage HOAs to engage in best practices for water quality in the river system. He asked whether SJRWMD had any ability to encourage HOAs to engage in water quality projects, and Ms. Hermle stated that most of the SJRWMD's outreach to HOAs involved water conservation, not water quality projects. Dr. Pinto noted that the increased marketing efforts could involve HOA outreach.

Ms. Rinaman noted that water supply had been added to the proposed River Accord framework; Council Member Peluso stated that it was an important consideration in conversations about the river and that the various stakeholders present could come together to identify projects in this area in which all stakeholders could participate.

Ms. Rinaman asked whether the administration was aware of conversations that had been had in the last River Accord about issues related to sedimentation. Ms. Long explained that she was not familiar with these conversations. Dr. Pinto stated that the State of the River Report looks at turbidity. He explained that Mike Hollingsworth, US Army Corps of Engineers, had previously been interested in issues related to turbidity and sedimentation but was not aware of other efforts related to this issue. He noted that the City is in a reactive posture regarding the issue of shoaling in the river, as it was unclear to what extent sedimentation is caused by natural versus human-related factors.

Mr. Burket explained that to further the public access goals of the River Accord, the Parks, Recreation, and Community Services Department had a list of potential land acquisitions that could increase public access to waterways. He stated that the biggest hurdle to seeing these projects come to fruition would be identifying funding. He noted that the River Accord could make policy recommendations to incentivize public access projects. Council Member Peluso noted that whether public access to waterways could be increased in a development project could be a factor considered in the permitting process but noted that this policy must also strike the correct balance so to not make the permitting process more onerous. Mr. Burket added that living shoreline projects would be of benefit to the goal of increasing public access.

Public Comment:

John Nooney explained frustration that dredging bills and a bill related to a septic tank vulnerability assessment were not going through the Jacksonville Waterways Commission. He stated that he found it sad that he was the only member of the public present for this meeting and that he had to "speak up" to get added to Planning Commission minutes. He noted that he was looking for a sponsor for a public park project on a FEMA repetitive-loss property on Pottsburg Creek.

Meeting adjourned: 11:50 a.m.

Minutes: Eamon Webb, Council Research Division
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