

City of Jacksonville

117 W. Duval Street
Jacksonville, FL 32202



Meeting Minutes

Thursday, January 16, 2025

2:00 PM

Council Chamber,
1st Floor, City Hall

Jacksonville Waterways Commission

CM Mike Gay, Chair

CM Ken Amaro, Vice Chair

CM Jimmy Peluso

CM Tyrona Clark-Murray, Alternate

Jon Michael Barker

Robert Birtalan

General Public Rep - Vacant

Representative Kiyon Michael - Excused

Mark Devereaux

Andrew Fraden

Marc Hardesty - Excused

Richard Hartley

Richard J. Redick

Jill Haskell - General Public Rep - Excused

Jack Meeks, Ex-Officio

Adam Hoyles, Ex-Officio - Absent

Rebecca Bolton, Legislative Assistant

Shannon MacGillis, Office of General Counsel

Dr. Gerard Pinto, Jacksonville University

Nayeli Jimenez, Council Research

Jim Suber, Waterways Coordinator

1. Call To Order**2. Pledge of Allegiance****3. Roll Call**

Chair Mike Gay called the meeting to order and welcomed attendees to the first Waterways Commission meeting of the year. Members introduced themselves, and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited

Present 12 - Chair Mike Gay, Vice Chair Ken Amaro, Council Member Jimmy Peluso, Alternate Tyrona Clark-Murray, Commissioner Jon Michael Barker, Commissioner Robert Birtalan, Commissioner Andrew Fraden, Commissioner Richard Hartley, Commissioner Richard Redick, Ex-Officio Jack Meeks, Commissioner Mark Devereaux, and Ex-Officio Adam Hoyles

Excused 3 - Commissioner Rep. Kiyon Michael, Commissioner Jill Haskell, and Commissioner Marc Hardesty

4. Approval of Minutes

The minutes from the December meeting were unanimously approved by voice vote.

5. Presentations**a. Huguenot Memorial Park Update**

Chair Gay introduced Brian Burket from the Parks Department to present an update on Huguenot Memorial Park.

Brian Burket explained that Huguenot Memorial Park is jointly managed by the city, state, and federal government, with 340 acres of land and significant jurisdictional overlays, including the Nassau River-St. Johns River Marsh Aquatic Preserve and Timucuan National Preserve area. He noted that the park management plan has been updated and submitted to the Division of State Lands for review. Their acquisition and restoration council is expected to take it up in April 2025 for final approval. Mr. Burket stated that the park gets about 400,000 visitors annually.

Mr. Burket described the park's ecological importance, highlighting that it is home to 278 bird species, many of which are migratory or use the area for nesting. He also noted that the park supports imperiled species such as sea turtles, which nest from April to September, and gopher tortoise. Volunteers assist in daily monitoring of sea turtle nest to mark and protect them from being driven over or disturbed by beachgoers. Burket explained that prescribed fires are conducted annually on two acres of the park to maintain habitats for nesting birds and reduce invasive species. These controlled burns are followed by herbicide treatments to prevent weed growth and encourage birds to nest in designated areas, minimizing conflicts with recreational activities. Burket also addressed enforcement and education efforts, explaining that staff collaborate with JSO, FWC, and volunteers to enforce park rules and educate visitors about the importance of conservation.

Jill Enz, Chief of Natural and Marine Resources, provided additional details about the park's infrastructure challenges. She noted that the park has lost about approximately 80 feet of dune structure along the main entry road in the past 4 years due to hurricanes and nor'easters. The flooding caused by these events often forces temporary closures and damages to infrastructure, such as the campground's electrical systems, which are expensive to repair. Ms. Enz explained that a short-term road repair project is underway and has already been approved by state agencies. The long-term plan involves relocating the entry road to higher ground to reduce flood risks. She also noted that the proposed road alignment would improve traffic flow by allowing vehicles to queue inside the park, alleviating congestion on A1A.

Council Member Amaro asked if the state's approval is required for the road relocation projects. Ms. Enz confirmed that the short-term approval goes through the state and that they sent it in the summer, but the long-term project must go through a formal review process.

Commissioner Fraden stated that this project was desperately needed, stating it was the "jewel of Jacksonville as far as parks and recreation." Mr. Fraden raised a concern that he did not hear anything about shoaling. He inquired whether there were any ongoing or future plans to address this issue. He noted that sediment buildup caused by natural and human activity over the past 30-40 years had significantly affected the area, particularly where fishing and windsurfing commonly take place. Mr. Burket responded that the shoaling in Fort George Inlet and its surrounding waterway is beyond the park's jurisdiction but is actively being monitored by the Army Corps of Engineers. He explained that the Army Corps of Engineers had conducted studies on how to address sediment movement and keep the inlet open. However, the project is currently stalled, awaiting congressional appropriations to fund the identified solutions. He stated that they continue to monitor developments and collaborate with state and federal agencies, including the State Parks Department, which acts as the local sponsor for these efforts. He added that the identified solution requires additional funding to move forward. Commissioner Fraden expressed his appreciation for the update and stated that if there was anything they needed to do for further to push these plans forward to get in contact with the committee.

Commissioner Mark Devereaux asked whether Huguenot Park is a state park or a city park. Mr. Burket clarified that the park is managed as a city park but is leased from both the state and federal

governments. The City of Jacksonville does not own the land but manages it under these agreements as a public park.

Commissioner Devereaux stated he resides on Heckscher Drive and highlighted the lack of city bus services in the area. He expressed concern that one of the “biggest push” for the Waterways Commission is ensuring access to waterways and parks for all residents, including Huguenot Park. He emphasized that this cannot happen if people without vehicles lack transportation options to reach these destinations.

Mr. Devereaux questioned whether any efforts had been made to provide public transportation, even if it’s just during peak summer months. Chair Gay responded that this issue had not been explored before but agreed it was worth further discussion. Commissioner Devereaux reiterated that Huguenot Park sees 400,000 visitors annually, yet Heckscher Drive frequently experiences traffic backups, particularly during high tide, when park access for vehicles is limited. He emphasized that the popularity of the park underscores the need for collaboration with JTA to develop even if it’s a seasonal weekend bus service to improve access for all residents.

Commissioner Richard Hartley inquired how the funding is handled with the improvements they want to make. Ms. Enz explained that the funding is currently through the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for this year, and they have an allocation from the CIP for doing portions of the improvements. She stated that she does not know how much the road is going to cost. She also noted that the park has received a \$200,000 grant from Resilient Florida to investigate the erosion along the St. Johns River to see what is causing it and how to best address it. Commissioner Hartley further inquired about the income the park receives from the visitors offset any of the expenses. Ms. Enz explained that park entry fees go back into the park.

Chair Gay reemphasized that this park is the “crown jewel of the city.” He commended the Parks Department for their quick response to storm damage, referencing their rapid reopening of the park after closures.

**b. Annual Waterways Manatee Update &
St. Johns River Status Report on Water Quality & Manatees**

Dr. Gerard Pinto, Jacksonville University began by emphasizing that this time of year is relatively calm in terms of manatee activity but expressed concern about the cold stress risk posed by current water temperatures. He explained that at the end of 2024, a final report for the manatee management plan was prepared and submitted for review. He stated that this report, which is available in the meeting packet, covers water levels, salinity, and other river data.

Dr. Pinto reported that water levels in the St. Johns River are currently slightly higher than average, measuring about half a foot above normal which was likely influenced by a recent full moon. He noted that rainfall conditions were uneven. He stated that 2024 ended with a rainfall surplus of 9 inches, which contributed to higher water levels, however, early 2025 has started with a rainfall deficit. He also stated that salinity levels in the river are elevated by a couple of points this week.

Dr. Pinto stated that water temperatures currently range between 54-56 degrees Fahrenheit, describing these as concerning for manatees. He explained that cold temperatures can lead to cold stress syndrome which is a significant cause of death among manatees during winter months. He further stated that 4 manatees have died from cold stress since the last meeting in December. The deaths occurred in: Durbin Creek, Ortega River, Goodby's Creek, and Nassau Sound. He stated that this brought the total number of manatee deaths in 2024 to 9, including 2 deaths caused by watercraft collisions earlier in the year. Dr. Pinto explained that no manatee deaths have been reported so far in 2025. Commissioner Michael Barker shared a recent encounter with one of his divers on his boat with a manatee in Ortega River. He described how the diver accidentally bumped into the manatee while working the vessel. He stated that the manatee swam nearby and eventually moved toward the St. Johns River. Mr. Barker expressed that he was surprised at seeing a manatee during such cold conditions.

Dr. Pinto explained that Ortega River historically had a spring there, but since has been paved over but there is a warm water seep, which attracts manatees during the cold weather. He also stated that historically, this area served as a health/holiday resort due to its warm waters. FWC has occasionally had to rescue manatees from the site, as they tend to congregate there when temperatures drop and that it only takes 2 degrees differential for it to attract manatees.

Chair Gay asked Ms. MacGillis, whether the commission needed to take formal action on the manatee plan implementation report.

Ms. MacGillis stated that the report was not listed on the agenda for action. Dr. Pinto explained that he would provide the commission with the report for review, noting that the "draft" label was included based on prior experience. He stated that, while he believes the report is final, council members/commissioners could raise questions or concerns before acceptance, which could be addressed at the next meeting. Chair Gay agreed, indicating that final approval could occur in the following month.

Dr. Pinto added that he typically submits the report by December for approval in January but noted a delay this year. Ms. MacGillis emphasized the importance of listing the report as an agenda action item, ensuring public awareness and compliance with Sunshine Law. She concluded that this approach was the best course of action.

6. Public Comment

Mr. John Nooney spoke about the importance of Jacksonville tourism, especially in the Pottsburg Creek area. He emphasized a public-private partnerships to enhance waterway access. He submitted materials from the Northeast Florida Regional Council for inclusion in the record.

7. New Business

- 2025-0019** ORD Auth the Mayor to Apply to the FL Inland Navigation Dist (FIND) for 2025 Grants to Undertake Specified Waterways-Related Projs; Auth the Mayor, or Her Desig, & the Corp Sec to Execute & Deliver all Grant Agmts btwn the City & FIND, as Well as All Docs Related to Such Grants; Acknowledging Willingness to Meet Funding Requirements; Prov for City Oversight by the Dept of Parks, Recreation & Community Svcs (Smith) (Req of Mayor) (JWC Apv)
1/14/25 CO Introduced: NCSPHS, F, JWC
Public Hearing Pursuant to Ch 166, F.S. & C.R. 3.601 - 1/28/25

Motion to recommend approval made and seconded. Mr. Brian Burket gave an overview of the legislation. He explained that the Ordinance includes a list of 2025 FIND grant projects previously reviewed and approved by the commission. He stated that this ordinance is the final step before submitting the applications. The projects include: the Pottsburg Creek Boat Ramp Renovation where they want to do a complete overhaul of the boat ramp, bulkhead and parking lot, along with elevation adjustment to address flooding issues caused by high tides and storm event. He stated that they are working closely with adjacent property owners to ensure minimal impact on neighboring lands and infrastructure and the cost for this project is \$4.4 million, The Seiden Park development which is a design of a new park on land donated to the city, located east of I-295 on Heckscher Drive. Its planned features include passive recreation areas, a fishing platform, observation areas over the marsh, and a kayak launch and the land area is approximately 2.5 acres. The last project is the Neptune Beach Kayak Launch in Hopkins Creek which is a county-collaborative project to construct a kayak launch. He noted that this project uses grant funds allocated to Neptune Beach, with no direct financial contribution from the City of Jacksonville.

Mr. Burket informed the commission about the FIND Board's activities, highlighting an ongoing public outreach event and reception scheduled tonight from 6-8PM at the South Bank Hotel, which provides an opportunity for commission member to meet with FIND staff and commissioners. He also introduced the newest FIND commissioner for Duval County, Pat Callaway, recently appointed to fill a long vacant seat.

Council Member Amaro asked for clarification on the Pottsburg Creek Boat Ramp location, specifically whether it was near a well-known surf shop. Mr. Burkett confirmed it was located adjacent to All Wet Sports on Beach Boulevard. Council member Amaro inquired about the location of Seiden Park. Mr. Burket stated it was east of I-295 near the Gate gas station off of Hecksher Dr.

The motion was approved unanimously via a hand vote.

8. Old Business

Chair Gay opened the old business by acknowledging the resignation of Commissioner Lane Burnett. Chair Gay expressed his gratitude for Commissioner Burnett's years of service, noting his significant contributions to the commissioner's work. He stated, "Commissioner Burnett's efforts and dedication will not go unrecognized."

a. St. Johns River Accord Task Force

Council Member Peluso shared that they have not scheduled another meeting, noting that the stadium Community Benefit Agreement required additional time and attention. He explained that the task force's work had been delayed due to these agreements but anticipated setting up a meeting in the next month. Council Member Peluso stated that he appreciated their flexibility in this.

b. Derelict Vessel Task Force

Ms. Shannon MacGillis reported that the legislation is currently under review by the auditors, with the process expected to conclude within the next week. She asked the commission whether they would want the legislation to return to the Waterways Commission for review prior to filing. Chair Gay confirmed that the commission would want the legislation to return to ensure there are no significant changes before it is filed.

Ms. MacGillis stated that she anticipates the legislation being included as an agenda item for the February meeting and that, once it is finalized, an electronic copy will be distributed to the commissioners.

Commissioner Jon Michael Barker inquired if the draft could be provided a week or two in advance of the meeting for review. Ms. McGillis agreed, stating that her intention is to provide the document at least 10 days ahead of the meeting. She added that the current draft is approximately 110 pages long. Commissioner Barker remarked that this is one of the most extensive documents he has had to review during his time on the Waterways Commission.

Ms. MacGillis further explained that the decision to send the draft to the auditors first was made out of courtesy, due to the length and complexity of the document. If the auditors had not received the draft early, they would have had limited time—perhaps only a week during the regular review process—to read and address it alongside their other responsibilities.

c. Shoaling and Artificial Reef Task Force

In the absence of Commissioner Marc Hardesty, Chair Gay shared that efforts were ongoing to address shoaling and artificial reef concerns and mentioned ongoing conversations with Congressman Bean's office. He also stated that Huguenot Park is a factor in this and emphasized the need for federal involvement in the process. He assured that progress updates would continue in future meetings.

9. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned by Chair Gay.

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