

City of Jacksonville

117 W. Duval Street
Jacksonville, FL 32202



Meeting Minutes

Thursday, February 13, 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 - Excused

Robert Birtalan

General Public Rep - Vacant

Representative Kiyon Michael - Excused

Mark Devereaux

Andrew Fraden

Marc Hardesty

Richard Hartley

Richard J. Redick - Excused

Jill Haskell - General Public Rep - Excused

Jack Meeks, Ex-Officio - Absent

Adam Hoyles, Ex-Officio - Excused

Rebecca Bolton, Legislative Assistant

Shannon MacGillis, Office of General Counsel

Dr. Gerard Pinto, Jacksonville University

Nayeli Jimenez, Council Research

Jim Suber, Waterways Coordinator

Meeting Convened: 2:02 PM**Meeting Adjourned: 2:36 PM****1. Call To Order****2. Pledge of Allegiance**

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

3. Roll Call

Present 8 - Chair Mike Gay, Vice Chair Ken Amaro, Council Member Jimmy Peluso, Commissioner Robert Birtalan, Commissioner Andrew Fraden, Commissioner Richard Hartley, Commissioner Marc Hardesty, and Commissioner Mark Devereaux

Excused 5 - Commissioner Jon Michael Barker, Commissioner Rep. Kiyon Michael, Commissioner Jill Haskell, Commissioner Richard Redick, and Ex-Officio Adam Hoyles

Absent 1 - Ex-Officio Jack Meeks

4. Approval of Minutes

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

5. St. Johns River Status Report on Water Quality & Manatees

Dr. Pinto, Jacksonville University, provided an update on current water quality conditions, rainfall, and salinity levels in the St. Johns River. He noted that conditions have been very dry since the last meeting, though some rainfall is anticipated. He noted that salinity levels have steadily increased based on recent sampling in Mayport (26 to 32 parts per thousand), Dames Point (18 to 26 parts per thousand), Jacksonville University (9 to 20 parts per thousand), Downtown (4 to 12 parts per thousand), and near the Buckman Bridge (1 part per thousand). Water temperatures have also risen, ranging from approximately 59 degrees in Mayport to 66-67 degrees near the Buckman Bridge, which he considered unusually warm for February.

Dr. Pinto advised that manatee activity remains relatively quiet, with no reported deaths since the last meeting. He stated that one mother and a calf pair were recently rescued from the Ortega River and transported to SeaWorld to prevent cold stress. Concerning algae blooms, Dr. Pinto indicated that samples show mixed algae but no toxins and that additional testing results are still pending.

Commissioner Fraden asked when manatees typically return to Duval County. Dr. Pinto responded that manatees usually reappear when water temperatures reach around 68 degrees and might return a couple of weeks early this year because of the warmer than average February. Commissioner Fraden also asked if there was a way to notify the media or the general boating public to be aware. Dr. Pinto noted that a press release usually goes out around April to coincide with boating and manatee season.

Captain Suber inquired about a reported carcass under a dock off Hecksher Drive, and that they had thought it was a carcass that had been necropsied and had disappeared from Buck Island.

Dr. Pinto stated that he was not aware of the situation.

Captain Suber later stated that it did not appear to be a new incident.

Council Member Amaro inquired about the specific salinity thresholds at which aquatic life in the river begins to experience adverse effects. He referenced that various salinity ranges presented by Dr. Pinto and asked for clarity on when salinity becomes devastating for aquatic species.

Dr. Pinto explained that most negative impacts occur in the river's transition zone, such as near the Buckman Bridge, where fresh and salt water mix. He emphasized that freshwater fish, vegetation, and other organisms – like the grasses manatees rely on – are affected when salinity increases over a sustained period – more than two weeks above approximately 12 parts per thousand. He pointed out that sedimentation patterns also change when salt water, which is denser, encounters fresh water; this leads to particles settling out more readily and can ultimately result in greater dredging requirements. Dr. Pinto noted that the estuary is strongly influenced by tidal action, creating fluctuations in salinity that may extend up to 100 miles inland, reaching areas such as Palatka or Lake George. He stressed that these factors combine to make the St. Johns River a highly dynamic system, constantly shifting in its salinity profile.

Chair Gay thanked Dr. Pinto for his presentation, noting that the update is always a treasure to the Commission.

6. Public Comment

Ms. Farah Ilami, introduced herself as the Regional Resiliency Manager for the Northeast Florida Regional Council (NEFRC) and distributed palm cards and handouts outlining the Council's legislative priorities. She highlighted that resiliency was a key element in these priorities particularly as it relates to infrastructure and noted that NEFRC is currently developing a Regional Resiliency Action Plan, expected to be finalized within the next year. She stated that their CEO, Ms. Beth Payne, would be able to answer any detailed questions, and that Ms. Ilami may answer just general questions or about resiliency.

Chair Gay thanked Ms. Ilami for her remarks and asked her to schedule a more in-depth presentation before the Commission, emphasizing that resiliency is a core aspect of the Commission's work.

Commissioner Hardesty thanked Ms. Ilami for her presentation and requested that, as part of NEFRC's future briefing to the Commission, she consult with CEO Beth Payne regarding Jacksonville's longstanding shoaling issues. He noted that they have had previously discussed this matter with Ms. Payne, emphasizing that shoaling has adversely affected local waterways and remains a critical obstacle to resilience. Commissioner Hardesty described the lack of progress on resolving this problem as "fairly deafening" and urged NEFRC to incorporate both the shoaling challenge and potential funding strategies into its resiliency framework and lobbying efforts.

Ms. Ilami affirmed she would confer with Ms. Payne.

Mr. John Nooney introduced himself by referencing various citation numbers, followed by comments about Jacksonville University and a missed ribbon-cutting ceremony. He expressed appreciation for both the City's Parks Department and the Waterways Commission. He highlighted that Duval County has been placed on the 2025 FIND staff recommendation list for land acquisition, emphasizing the significance of preserving local wetlands. Mr. Nooney also proposed the idea of creating a documentary likening it to notable productions and mentioning high profile figures like Elon Musk. He cited ongoing conservation efforts in neighboring counties, underscoring the importance of continued land preservation and public access to natural areas. He concluded by encouraging support for local tourism, calling attention to District 4 and Pottsburg Creek as prime examples of resources that can be promoted for the benefit of the community.

7. New Business

a. Approval of Manatee Protection Plan Implementation Report

Chair Gay introduced the Manatee Protection Plan Implementation Report and noted that the Commission had received it for review.

Ms. MacGillis, Office of General Counsel, explained that the Commission's role is simply to acknowledge receipt of the report rather than take a formal vote.

Chair Gay confirmed that the plan was officially acknowledged. He then stated his intention to invite representatives from the Planning and Development Department to present their findings at an upcoming meeting.

8. Old Business

a. St. Johns River Accord Task Force

Council Member Peluso stated that discussions regarding the St. Johns River Accord had been temporarily postponed while the Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) committee continued its work. He indicated that the CBA committee was expected to meet in March and noted that he had been in communication with stakeholders on the East Side for that process, which does not fall under the Waterways Commission's jurisdiction. Council Member Peluso added that once the CBA process is completed, the Commission would resume its focus on the River Accord.

b. Derelict Vessel Task Force

In Commissioner Barker's absence, Ms. MacGillis explained that the Derelict Vessels Task Force's Chapter 388 rewrite remains under review by the auditors, who have requested additional time to review. She noted that the draft would likely be ready by the next Waterways Commission meeting and would be distributed to members at least ten days in advance, allowing sufficient time for review

c. Shoaling and Artificial Reef Task Force

Commissioner Hardesty began by expressing interest in hearing from the Northeast Florida Regional Council regarding its priorities, anticipating a robust discussion at a future meeting. He then focused his remarks on the topic of artificial reefs, noting that Jacksonville was once considered a national leader in reef development but has effectively been at a standstill since approximately 2009, when the city collaborated on the sinking a vessel known as “The Spike.” He explained that most subsequent reef initiatives in the area have come from the private sector, which has pushed them further. He stated that he had scheduled a meeting with Melissa Long, Chief of the Environmental Quality Division, on February 25th to discuss grant writing and funding opportunities for artificial reef projects. He also mentioned speaking with Mr. Keith Mille of the Florida Artificial Reef Program, who confirmed that Jacksonville has largely been inactive in this field for some time, partly due to turnover and the loss of key personnel who once managed grant applications and project coordination. He highlighted the significant economic and environmental benefits of artificial reefs, referencing data indicating a “\$3.1 billion infusion” to the state’s economy from industries that utilize these structures, specifically recreational and commercial fishing. He pointed to Okaloosa County as an example, describing its “vibrant and active” artificial reef commission and the success it has achieved. Commissioner Hardesty further reported that 19 open Army Corps of Engineers permits for reef sites are valid through July 2029, with the option for extension if certain requirements are met. He emphasized that this existing regulatory framework means much of the “heavy lifting” has already been done, positioning Jacksonville favorably if it pursues funding and renewed activity. He added that Governor DeSantis’s budget includes \$10 million specifically allocated for artificial reefs, offering the potential for Jacksonville to secure a portion of this funding if local leaders advocate effectively. Reflecting on the condition of existing offshore reefs, he noted that many deployed materials have deteriorated over decades, reducing their overall effectiveness. Commissioner Hardesty underscored the city’s strong fishing and diving community, suggesting that expanding and maintaining reef infrastructure would bolster Jacksonville’s reputation as an ecotourism destination and further benefit local businesses. Commissioner Hardesty recommended inviting Mr. Mille of the Florida Artificial Reef Program to speak before the Commission—potentially in April for a detailed overview of current opportunities, permitting requirements and best practices. He expressed optimism about securing resources to reinvigorate Jacksonville’s artificial reef development efforts and thanked the Commission for its support in bringing renewed attention to this initiative.

Chair Gay thanked Commissioner Hardesty for his comments on artificial reefs.

Council Member Peluso expressed concern about identifying suitable sites for offshore reef deployment, noting that Jacksonville has two naval installations in the region and that any rebuilding efforts must not conflict with military requirements or create ecological or tourism related issues. He asked if anyone had examined the compatibility of potential locations before proceeding. Captain Suber responded that the City holds multiple permits, managed under a system of “pods,” each located outside shipping lanes. He noted that some pods had been used in earlier artificial reef deployments, including the sinking of “The Spike,” while additional sites remain available. He cautioned that reef sites be maintained in compliance with Army Corps of Engineers permits, someone must regularly inspect them, remove fishing lines, and address potential hazards. This ongoing maintenance has been a challenge, as it requires a dedicated entity or volunteers to ensure proper stewardship. He also mentioned “fish attracting devices” placed farther offshore to draw baitfish and subsequently pelagic species, which in turn attract fisherman and generate significant tourism and tournament opportunities – particularly in areas like Daytona, South Carolina, and the Gulf Coast, where large scale fishing tournaments bring considerable revenue.

Commissioner Birtalan inquired about previous conflicts with local shrimpers regarding reefs and if the

Commission should anticipate any opposition.

Captain Suber explained that reef placements within the 3-mile limit were once a major concern for shrimpers; however, discussions and certain agreements helped identify locations where reefs would not interfere with their activity. He noted that the current permit sites are situated well offshore, reducing the likelihood of renewed pushback.

Commissioner Hardesty added that all 19 existing permits are for locations farther offshore, so shrimping conflicts are unlikely.

Chair Gay allowed Mr. John Nooney to speak about this and Mr. Nooney suggested that maintenance partnerships could be fostered with local organizations such as TISIRI (“Think It, Sink It, Reef It) and pointed out the existence of the City’s Artificial Reef Trust Fund (Ordinance 2009-442) as a mechanism for collecting donations. He further emphasized that reefs placed 3 miles from shore could prove beneficial for snapper fishing and encouraged continued expansion of artificial reef programs.

Chair Gay concluded by thanking Commissioner Hardesty and underscored the Commission’s support for reinvigorating Jacksonville’s artificial reef initiatives. He reiterated the Commission’s intent to promote these efforts and seek opportunities for collaborating and funding.

9. Adjournment

Chair Gay adjourned the meeting.

Pursuant to the American with Disabilities Act, accommodations for persons with disabilities are available upon request. Please allow 1-2 business days notification to process; last minute requests will be accepted; but may not be possible to fulfill. Please contact Disabled Services Division at: V 904-255-5466, TTY-904-255-5476, or email your request to KaraT@coj.net.

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