



## **OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL RESEARCH DIVISION**

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### **JACKSONVILLE WATERWAYS COMMISSION AMENDED ARTIFICIAL REEFS SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES**

**March 12, 2025  
10:00 a.m.**

**In attendance:** Council Member Mike Gay (Chair), Commissioner Marc Hardesty, Captain Jim Suber, Waterways Coordinator

**Also:** Brian Burket, Waterfront Project Manager, Bryan Campbell, District Director for U.S. Congressman Aaron Bean, Melissa Long, Chief of Environmental Quality, Joe Kistel, Bethany Bryan, Executive Council Assistant, District 2, Nayeli Jimenez, Council Research

**Meeting Convened:** 10:03 am

Council Member Gay convened the meeting and members introduced themselves for the record.

#### **St. Johns River Shoaling**

Chair Gay stated that the city has recently funded efforts to address the shoaling in the St. Johns River, which has become a significant navigational hazard. He noted that while the area was previously considered hazardous only at low tide, it now poses a risk at all times. Chair Gay mentioned that boating incidents have occurred in the area and emphasized the need for discussions to identify potential solutions. He expressed the belief that there is an understanding of where the shoaling is coming from but stated the importance of engaging with the Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies to determine resolutions. Chair Gay reiterated the need for coordination among all relevant entities to address the issue effectively.

Mr. Hardesty stated that the shoaling issue has been ongoing for approximately eight years. He explained that the issue began when the Back River was dredged, a process that involved cutting in the middle of Blount Island. The dredged material was then pumped across the river into the Palms Fish Camp spoil area, where it was deposited, and the water drained out through pipes at the bottom. He recalled that during the initial days of dredging, there was significant leaching of soil, water, and material from the site. He stated that the Army Corps of Engineers had followed the permitting process, and there was an emergency stoppage that was later corrected. However, he noted that dredging operations have continued annually, typically around the time of the Florida-Georgia football game in late October and early November, for

periods of six to eight weeks. He added that during these times, sediment accumulation has been observed, affecting areas such as the Palms restaurant parking lot.

Commissioner Hardesty mentioned that he had previously provided Amanda Crawford with a comprehensive packet of photographs, maps, and videos documenting the shoaling issue. He noted that this material had been forwarded to Representative Bean approximately a year ago to ensure awareness of the situation.

He described the shoal as a navigational hazard affecting both boaters and local residents. He stated that the city, along with Captain Suber and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), had installed warning buoys along the shoal's perimeter. He explained that during king tides—extreme high and low tides occurring in the fall and spring—the shoal becomes fully exposed, protruding approximately nine inches to a foot above the waterline. He estimated that during these tides, the shoal extends for approximately 400 to 500 yards across the river.

Mr. Hardesty identified the Army Corps of Engineers, the Marine Corps, and the Marine Corps spoil area as key entities involved in the dredging process. He stated that despite repeated discussions with these agencies, they have not provided a resolution. He expressed frustration with the Army Corps' position, stating that they had placed obstacles in the way of any corrective measures by requiring a \$3 million study before further discussions could take place. He noted that the issue had been presented multiple times before the Jacksonville Waterways Commission and the Shoaling Subcommittee but had not resulted in progress. He recalled that former Congressman Rutherford had been sympathetic to the issue, but due to district changes, the matter was not advanced. He emphasized the need for Representative Bean's support in addressing the problem. Mr. Hardesty described several boating incidents related to the shoaling, including an incident in which a boat struck the shoal, causing a young woman to be thrown from the bow and sustain an injury, which he believed to be a broken ankle. He also mentioned having personally assisted multiple stranded boats and noted that even the U.S. Coast Guard had run aground in the area. He stated that despite the presence of warning markers, he remained concerned about the potential for a fatal accident.

He explained that the shoal is located in what is known as a "hurricane hole," an area where larger boats, including sailboats, anchor to seek refuge from storms or for temporary mooring. He further noted that the shoaling issue has economic implications, impacting shrimp boats docked on the river as well as commercial and recreational fishing activities. Hardesty concluded by reiterating his concerns about the shoaling's safety and economic impact and emphasized the need for a resolution.

Captain Suber stated that the shoaling issue is not a natural phenomenon and is not occurring due to natural causes. He explained that sediment has been visibly discharged from pipes, and its movement direction has been observed. He noted that this condition had not always existed in the waterway.

He described the Back River as part of the original St. Johns River and stated that the cut in front of the Blount Island area undergoes regular dredging by the Army Corps of Engineers as part of a routine maintenance process. He further noted that the Back River, along with Clapboard Creek and the surrounding waterway system, is a naturally occurring river system.

Captain Suber stated that the shoaling issue has developed within the past eight years. He noted that temporary markers had been installed to indicate the shoal's presence. These markers were engineered and installed by a contractor through the Parks Department, but they serve as a temporary measure until a permanent solution is implemented. He acknowledged that dredging of the Marine Corps basin is necessary and that the removed material must be placed somewhere. He noted that the facility where the material has been deposited is not inherently problematic but has not been maintained properly. He explained that one of the suspected issues is that the facility fills beyond capacity, causing material to flow back into the water system rather than remaining contained within the basin or spoil site. Captain Suber concluded by stating that this situation remains an ongoing issue that requires further resolution.

Mr. Hardesty stated that efforts to address the shoaling issue have gone beyond discussions with the Army Corps of Engineers. He mentioned that Jacksonville University's Marine Science Program, led by Dr. Jeremy Stalker and Dr. Quentin White, has been involved in efforts to analyze and address the shoaling. Dr. Stalker developed a plan to track sediment movement by using stained grains of glass that fluoresce under specific conditions, allowing for visual identification of sediment sources. However, Mr. Hardesty noted that the plan has faced resistance and that the Army Corps has maintained that a \$3 million study would be required before moving forward. He emphasized that funding such a study is beyond the city's immediate capacity and reiterated the urgency of resolving the issue before a serious tragedy occurs.

Council Member Gay acknowledged Mr. Hardesty's comments and confirmed that Jacksonville University had previously outlined a study proposal to identify the source of the shoaling material. He stated that an initial up-front cost of \$200,000 was presented, but unanswered questions made it difficult to justify the expenditure. He expressed concerns about whether the Army Corps would recognize the study's findings and noted that obtaining federal approval remains a challenge. Council Member Gay also highlighted that city officials have been unable to access the spoil area due to Army Corps security restrictions.

Mr. Hardesty stated that the Army Corps had refused to allow local officials to examine the spoil area, making it difficult to assess the situation fully.

Council Member Gay described how dredging operations function across multiple basins, with sediment being processed in phases before being reintroduced into the St. Johns River. He emphasized the need for proper maintenance of sediment basins to prevent unintended sediment migration. He also mentioned that dredging activities have altered the currents in the river, leading to increased erosion at Huguenot Park.

Brian Burket, Waterfront Project Manager, explained that shoreline erosion along the St. Johns River has been ongoing for years but has recently accelerated to the point where roadways and infrastructure are being affected. He noted that previous efforts to mitigate erosion, including patch repairs and riprap installations, have had limited success. He stated that in response to worsening conditions, plans are being made to relocate affected roadways further inland. He also mentioned that during a past hurricane, a portion of the roadway was entirely washed out.

Council Member Gay stated that Huguenot Park was closed for several days due to erosion issues, and misinformation on social media suggested that the park was closed indefinitely. He reported that over 90,000 comments were received on social media thanking officials for reopening the park quickly. He also mentioned that discussions are ongoing regarding potential road relocation to protect infrastructure from further erosion.

Bryan Campbell, District Director for Congressman Aaron Bean, acknowledged the challenges faced by the city in addressing the shoaling issue. He stated that Congressman Bean's office had assisted in obtaining responses from the Army Corps of Engineers and Blount Island officials. However, he noted that while the Army Corps has maintained that its dredging activities occur offshore, conflicting observations from local officials indicate otherwise. Mr. Campbell emphasized the importance of gathering data to verify the source of the shoaling and suggested that if the city moves forward with a study, Congressman Bean's office will provide support.

Mr. Hardesty questioned when the Army Corps first claimed that dredging materials were being dumped offshore, stating that he had never heard that explanation before.

Mr. Campbell stated that he was unsure when the Army Corps' position changed but confirmed that their current dredging contracts specify offshore disposal. He reiterated that a study could help clarify discrepancies in sediment movement. He also suggested exploring federal grant opportunities to help offset

study costs and stated that Congressman Bean's office would assist in coordinating discussions with federal agencies.

Council Member Gay requested further clarification on the Army Corps' dredging procedures. He stated that if dredged material is no longer being placed in spoil areas, a study may not be necessary. However, he emphasized the need for clear confirmation of current dredging practices.

Mr. Campbell stated that obtaining verification of current practices is crucial. He suggested that even if dredging activities have changed, a study could still be useful in determining the cause of the shoaling.

Mr. Hardesty stated that if the Army Corps had changed its dredging methods, Jacksonville University's proposed study using stained glass particles would no longer be effective in tracking sediment. He emphasized the importance of confirming these changes before committing resources to a study.

Mr. Campbell acknowledged the concern and agreed to follow up on the issue. He noted that while dredging operations may have changed, the shoaling issue remains unresolved, and a study could still provide valuable insight into its cause.

Captain Suber clarified that the Army Corps conducts dredging for both port maintenance and other navigational purposes. He stated that while offshore disposal is part of standard port dredging, sediment is also piped to specific basins when basin maintenance is required. He noted that these basins can remain unused for extended periods before being dredged again.

Mr. Campbell stated that the key to resolving the issue is asking precise questions about dredging activities. He suggested that if the subcommittee could provide a specific question regarding intermittent dredging activities, Congressman Bean's office could seek a definitive response from federal agencies.

Mr. Hardesty referenced past hydrological studies that indicated sediment accumulation follows a "snowball effect," where once a shoal forms, it continues to grow as it collects additional sediment. He emphasized that even if offshore disposal has become the standard practice, remediation efforts may still be necessary to address existing shoaling.

Mr. Campbell stated that the first priority should be stopping any ongoing sediment accumulation before considering remediation efforts.

Mr. Hardesty referenced a similar issue at Charles Pass in St. Petersburg, where dredging without addressing the underlying cause led to recurring shoaling. He stated that this example highlights the importance of stopping sediment movement at the source before undertaking any mitigation efforts.

Mr. Campbell stated that the shoaling discussion would continue and that Congressman Bean's office remains available to assist.

Mr. Hardesty expressed appreciation for the discussion and stated that the information provided by Mr. Campbell was the most encouraging update the Shoaling Commission had received.

Mr. Campbell stated that ongoing communication will be maintained and that efforts will continue to facilitate progress on the issue.

## Artificial Reef

Mr. Hardesty provided an update on recent efforts regarding Jacksonville's artificial reef program. He stated that he had met with Melissa Long from the Environmental Division to discuss the history and current status of the program. He noted that artificial reef projects had been under the city's management for years but had not received sustained attention. Mr. Hardesty introduced Joe Kistel, an expert in artificial reef projects who has worked extensively along the Gulf and East Coasts. He also acknowledged Dan from Arlington Bait & Tackle, which has been involved in supporting the initiative. Mr. Hardesty highlighted that during the last Waterways Commission meeting, he announced a state-level push to bolster artificial reef programs, with up to \$10 million in funding available. He emphasized that Jacksonville was once a leader in artificial reef projects along the East Coast but had fallen behind since 2009 due to shifts in city priorities. He noted that while surrounding counties such as St. Johns and Volusia have remained active, Jacksonville has not undertaken a city-led reef project in over a decade. He stated that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has existing grants available, with a deadline of March 21. Upon learning this, he and other stakeholders, mobilized to apply for a \$60,000 grant. Mr. Hardesty noted that Jacksonville already has a set of approved offshore permits for artificial reefs, dating back to 2017 and valid until 2029, with the potential of extending it. The proposed grant project focuses on the restoration and renourishment of "Harm's Ledge," a reef previously established by the Jacksonville Offshore Sport Fishing Club. Mr. Hardesty acknowledged that the technical aspects of reef construction require expertise and credited Kistel for his role in guiding the project. He also stated that securing funding has been an ongoing challenge due to the lack of city support for artificial reef programs.

Melissa Long, Chief of Environmental Quality, stated that she was uncertain about the exact timeline for FWC grant approvals but believed contracts would be finalized by September. She noted that once funds are awarded, the city would need additional time to complete the required administrative processes for appropriation, which could take several months.

Mr. Hardesty reiterated that Kistel had been leading the project. He noted that Kistel had been contributing his expertise voluntarily for years but that the Jacksonville Offshore Sport Fishing Club recently voted to allocate \$2,500 to support his work. Hardesty stated that this financial commitment reflects the strong local support for the project. He added that additional community involvement is being sought, including participation from local tackle shops and Safe Harbor. He emphasized that artificial reefs provide significant economic benefits, particularly for recreational and commercial fishing. He also noted the decline of commercial fishing in the area and the importance of supporting recreational fishing, which remains a major economic driver. Mr. Hardesty acknowledged that the city lacks the internal expertise for grant writing on artificial reef projects, stating that securing long-term funding will require educating city officials on the economic benefits of artificial reefs. He noted that Councilman Gay and others have expressed support for the initiative but that more work is needed to integrate the project into city planning and budgeting.

Joe Kistel introduced himself as a coordinator for local artificial reef projects and emphasized the importance of outreach in ensuring community awareness and engagement. He provided a brief history of Jacksonville's artificial reef program, stating that since 2009, approximately one reef has been built every two years, totaling around 10 to 12 projects. He noted that Duval County has contributed minimal funding to these efforts compared to other counties. Mr. Kistel explained that while Duval County has relied on in-kind contributions and external contractors, other counties, such as Okaloosa and Volusia, have dedicated funding and staff to artificial reef programs. He identified two key differences between Jacksonville and more successful programs:

1. Other counties have designated departments or staff focused on artificial reefs.
2. Other counties have dedicated funding sources or actively seek funding to support reef construction.

He stated that the FWC grant for which they are applying is the maximum amount available—\$60,000—but noted that the total FWC grant budget for the entire state is only \$600,000. He expressed concern that, given federal budget uncertainties, this funding could be reduced in the future. Mr. Kistel compared Jacksonville’s funding levels to those of other counties, stating that between 2019 and 2022, Okaloosa County averaged approximately \$1.5 million per year in artificial reef projects. He emphasized that even if Jacksonville secures the FWC grant, additional funding will be needed to implement long-term solutions. He also noted that obtaining the grant will require significant effort, as city approval processes add layers of complexity. He suggested that Jacksonville should develop a more structured approach to artificial reef projects, potentially through a dedicated staff position or partnership with an outside consultant.

Mr. Hardesty commended Long and Kistel for their work and reiterated that securing a stable funding source is essential. He likened the situation to the shoaling issue, stating that problems must be addressed at their source before remediation efforts can be effective. He noted that artificial reef projects were previously managed under Parks and Recreation but were later moved to Environmental Services. He expressed uncertainty about the reasoning for this change and suggested that it may be more beneficial for reef projects to be handled under Parks and Recreation due to their connection to recreational fishing and tourism. Mr. Hardesty emphasized that artificial reefs contribute to Jacksonville’s economy by supporting events such as the Kingfish and Sheepshead fishing tournaments. He also noted that reefs improve environmental sustainability by providing marine habitats.

Mr. Campbell stated that artificial reef programs are important to Congressman Bean. He noted that the congressman has supported initiatives related to recreational and commercial fishing, including lifting restrictions on redfish fishing. Mr. Campbell advised that while securing federal funding for artificial reefs may be challenging, there are opportunities for state and local collaboration. He recommended engaging with state legislators and securing their support for grant applications. He also noted that while a \$60,000 grant would not fully address Jacksonville’s artificial reef needs, it could serve as a foundation for future investment. Mr. Campbell acknowledged that other counties have dedicated funding streams for artificial reef programs and suggested that Jacksonville should explore similar options. He also mentioned that there may be federal grants available and offered to assist in identifying potential funding sources.

Captain Suber stated that artificial reefs are a regional issue affecting not only Jacksonville but also Nassau, St. Johns, Clay, and Baker counties. He emphasized the need for a coordinated regional approach to secure funding and manage artificial reef projects effectively. He also raised concerns about federal fishing regulations, stating that proposed policies could restrict access to reefs for three months each year. He urged Congressman Bean’s office to continue advocating such restrictions and emphasized the economic impact that fishing bans could have on the region.

Mr. Campbell confirmed that Congressman Bean supports efforts to prevent unnecessary fishing restrictions and will continue to advocate for local fishing interests. He agreed that Jacksonville should take the lead in artificial reef initiatives but emphasized that regional collaboration would enhance funding opportunities.

Council Member Gay thanked participants for their input and asked Kistel whether he had engaged with the Northeast Florida Regional Council.

Mr. Kistel stated that he had not yet engaged with the Northeast Florida Regional Council.

Council Member Gay suggested that Kistel meet with him to discuss the possibility of presenting the artificial reef initiative to the Northeast Florida Regional Council, which represents seven counties. He stated that involving the council could help advance the project and secure additional funding.

Mr. Hardesty provided a follow-up on shoaling discussions, stating that the Northeast Florida Regional Council has already been engaged in that issue. He noted that Beth Payne from the council has agreed to include the shoaling discussion on the agenda for an upcoming meeting. He stated that while the date of the meeting has not been determined, the involvement of the regional council is an important step.

Mr. Hardesty concluded by emphasizing the importance of regional collaboration in addressing both shoaling and artificial reef initiatives.

**Public Comment**

John Nooney provided public input regarding the Artificial Reef Trust Fund, emphasizing the need for dedicated funding sources to sustain these efforts long-term.

**Meeting adjourned:** 11:05 a.m.

Minutes: Nayeli Jimenez, Council Research Division

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