

City of Jacksonville

*117 W. Duval Street
Jacksonville, FL 32202*



Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, September 9, 2026

3:30 PM

**Council Chamber,
1st Floor, City Hall**

Special Committee on Drowning Prevention

*Council Member Reggie Gaffney, Jr., Chair
Council Member Tyrone Clark-Murray, Vice-Chair
Council Member Mike Gay*

*Legislative Asst: Vanessa Galan
Research: Steven Libby
Auditors: Heather Reber
OGC: Shannon MacGillis*

I. Call to Order

II. Introduction

Chair Reggie Gaffney, Jr., convened the meeting and called for introductions at 3:30 p.m.

III. Why the Committee Was Formed

Chair Gaffney, Jr., provided an overview of the purpose of the Special Committee. He stated that there had been two deaths in one month in Jacksonville and thanked Council President Howland for allowing the Special Committee to be established.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., described the drowning incident that occurred in his district on August 5. He stated that he had reached out to Public Works, the Mayor's administration, and Development Services to discuss the issue, and had decided to hold a noticed meeting on August 25. He added that an additional drowning incident had occurred on the day before the August 25 noticed meeting, and stated that the second victim was also autistic and from his district. Chair Gaffney, Jr., stated that it was concluded during the August 25 noticed meeting that more time would be needed to investigate the issue. He stated that he then requested that Council President Howland form the Special Committee on Drowning Prevention.

IV. Committee Purpose and Review of the President's Six Charges

Chair Gaffney, Jr., reviewed the six charges of the Special Committee: to review emergency response and data; to review prevention, public education, and awareness; to evaluate risks associated with youth, elopement, and special needs water safety; to review public residential retention and stormwater facility safety; to establish interagency and community partnerships; and to examine best practices, legislative authority, and recommendations. He added that the Special Committee would need to verify the facts before it could fulfill the charges.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., thanked CM Tyrona Clark-Murray and CM Mike Gay for serving as members of the Special Committee and asked what they would like to see from the process.

CM Gay expressed hope that the Special Committee could identify solutions and measures to prevent future drowning deaths.

CM Clark-Murray stated that her expectation was to draft and pass legislation that would help the construction and development community understand the importance of creating safer retention ponds. She expressed hope that parents and apartment management companies could be educated on the importance of knowing whether a child with autism is in the development and what precautions needed to be taken to ensure safety. She added that she expected little to no pushback on the issue because lives could be saved. She acknowledged that measures such as fencing and mitigation come with costs, but stated that what was necessary must be done to save the lives of all children.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., added that an 80-year-old man had died in a retention pond in March, and stated that drowning risks extend to the elderly as well. Chair Gaffney, Jr., then asked Ms. Shannon MacGillis, OGC, whether the City Council could impose restrictions on retention ponds with Senate Bill 180 in effect. Ms. MacGillis explained that the answer would depend on the specific context of a given pond, such as who owns it and where it is located. She added that the best time to analyze the application of Senate Bill 180 would be after the Special Committee had gathered its facts and was ready to identify solutions.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., asked whether the City has an inventory of retention ponds. Mr. Steve Long, Public Works, stated that Public Works keeps an inventory of publicly owned retention ponds. He added that he did not have the specific number with him, but that the number of publicly owned retention ponds is in the hundreds while the number of privately owned retention ponds is in the thousands.

CM Clark-Murray asked how "public" is defined. Mr. Long stated that "public" in this context means that the retention pond is owned by the City of Jacksonville. He then differentiated between publicly owned retention ponds under the jurisdiction of Public Works, such as those on city roads or city parks, and other publicly owned retention ponds that are not, such as those overseen by the Housing Authority, the School Board, the Port Authority, and the Aviation Authority. He added that examples of private retention ponds include those in subdivisions and those found at shopping centers.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., stated that the specific number of private retention ponds needed to be identified, as the last two deaths had occurred in private retention ponds. Chair Gaffney, Jr., asked Mr. Steven Libby, Council Research, whether that information could be obtained. Mr. Libby stated that he would attempt to gather that information before the next meeting.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., asked Mr. Libby how many drowning deaths had occurred in the last four or five years. Mr. Libby stated that since 2021, there have been 11 drowning deaths of children on the spectrum. Chief Andre Ayoub, Jacksonville Fire and Rescue Department Emergency Preparedness Division, stated that JFRD Fire Chief Golden had tasked him with investigating drowning statistics, and that over the past two years there have been 86 incidents. He recommended that a working group be created to present more findings.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., asked for confirmation that private retention ponds must be permitted by the St. Johns River Water Management District. Mr. Long confirmed this, stating that a Water Management District permit and/or a Department of Environmental Protection permit would be obtained, followed by a City permit through the Public Works Development Services Division.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., asked Mr. Doug Conkey, St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD), for the number of private retention ponds. Mr. Conkey stated that he needed to discuss the question with SJRWMD leadership. Chair Gaffney, Jr., added that he would like to know from SJRWMD how often retention ponds are inspected and which ponds are low risk or high risk.

CM Gay asked Mr. Conkey what measures SJRWMD applies to the construction and design of retention ponds. Mr. Conkey stated that he would also discuss that question with SJRWMD leadership. CM Clark-Murray stated that she had noticed that the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has language in its code regarding safety, in contrast with SJRWMD, which addresses safety only in regard to the slope of the pond. CM Clark-Murray also asked whether consideration had been given to adding more safety language to the code. Mr. Conkey stated that he would also discuss that question with SJRWMD leadership.

CM Clark-Murray stated that she understands the necessity of retention ponds but that they cannot become a detriment to the community. She described the creation of Chloe's Law by the Florida Legislature as an illustration that the risks extend beyond children. She added that she would like the SJRWMD code to be reviewed and compared with those of other water management districts throughout the state to improve safety. Chair Gaffney, Jr., stated that Council President Howland had charged the Special Committee with investigating best practices in other counties.

V. Public Comment

Ms. Sonya Leggett spoke on the necessity of cameras and sensors near retention ponds to increase safety.

Ms. D'Archa Bennett spoke on the necessity of prioritizing free or low-cost swimming lessons in high-needs neighborhoods and on her willingness to assist in those efforts.

Ms. Addison Patrick recommended several safety measures, such as perimeter alarms and tracking devices, and spoke on gathering more data and information to guide policies.

Ms. Adrienne Menzies, Fortera Fencing, asked that the Special Committee consider maintenance access and self-closing latches for retention ponds, the differences in requirements between pools and retention ponds, and whether any policies would apply only to future developments or retroactively to previous developments.

VI. Recap and Next Steps

Chair Gaffney, Jr., stated that the City Council approves new developments with ponds every two weeks, and asked OGC what could be done in the meantime. Ms. MacGillis stated that little could be done regarding permits currently in process, but that she was willing to look into the issue.

CM Clark-Murray asked Ms. MacGillis whether it would be acceptable to examine more closely the landscape component of planned developments and their retention ponds in the Land Use and Zoning Committee, or to add conditions to a development. Ms. MacGillis stated that in her research so far, landscaping with shrubbery may be a problem because an individual in a pond might not be visible. She stated the importance of first taking inventory of retention ponds in the City and mapping them before definitive answers could be given.

Ms. Helena Parola, Planning Department Director, specified that the only zoning district that allows conditions is a Planned Unit Development (PUD). She stated that the Council could work with the applicant, with the applicant's agreement, to add conditions for safety requirements. She added that Planning Department recommendations are grounded in code, and that the Department could not make those recommendations until the code has been changed.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., asked whether there is a database or demographic information on autistic children in the City. Ms. Bennett stated that she is a Medicaid provider for the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD), and recommended reaching out to APD to obtain those statistics.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., stated that the Special Committee would meet every other Wednesday from 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and that the next meeting would be held on Wednesday, September 23, 2026. He added that by the next meeting, an inventory of public and private retention ponds would be available. He stated that he also wanted to reach out to the autism community to obtain more demographic information, and that Chief Ayoub would present more health data. Chair Gaffney, Jr., asked Mr. Libby to research best practices in other communities. CM Clark-Murray requested that Mr. Libby investigate Hillsborough, Nassau, Orange, and Broward Counties, and one other county comparable in size.

CM Gay recommended to Chair Gaffney, Jr., that the Northeast Florida Regional Council (NEFRC) be contacted to determine what research it could contribute. He added that he wanted OGC to specify the parameters within which the Special Committee must work.

Mr. Joe Inderhees, Mayor's Office, stated that it may be helpful to organize the issue into four categories: public, private, existing, and future, while taking advantage of existing partnerships and programs.

Chair Gaffney, Jr., stated that the Council President had given the Special Committee until the end of the year to identify solutions, and that he hoped to create legislation.

VII. Adjournment

Chair Gaffney, Jr., adjourned the meeting at 4:19 p.m.

Minutes: Steven Libby, Council Research
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Posted: 9/14/26, 4:00 p.m.