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RESEARCH DIVISION**

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JACKSONVILLE WATERWAYS COMMISSION RIVER ACCORD TASK FORCE

Meeting Minutes

February 23rd, 2024 10:00 a.m.

Location: Lynwood Roberts Room, 1st floor

In attendance: JWC Chairman Jimmy Peluso; JWC Commissioner Jon Michael Barker; JWC Commissioner Rick Hartley; JWC ex-officio member Adam Hoyles; Lisa Rinamen, St. Johns Riverkeeper; Wayne Young, JEA; Dr. Allison DeFoor, North Florida Land Trust; Dr. Gerry Pinto, Jacksonville University

Also: Shannon MacGillis, Office of the General Counsel; Doug Conkey, St. Johns River Water Management District; Cori Hermle, St. Johns River Water Management District; James Richardson, Environmental Protection Board; Melissa Long, Chief of Environmental Quality; Brian Burket, Waterfront Projects Manager

Meeting Convened: 10:06 a.m.

Chairman Peluso called the meeting to order. He noted that Thomas B. Waters, the new appointed

Neighborhoods Director, was in the audience. He introduced Dr. Allison DeFoor, President of North Florida Land Trust, to discuss waterways conservation and potential projects that could be used to increase public access to waterways.

Dr. DeFoor explained that NFLT had recently worked to conserve 33,000 acres of land, with about 17,000 conservation easements issued. He explained that there is not a lot of waterfront land left unowned in the area but that NFLT had discussed the possibility of using federal funds to purchase wetlands. He referred to a map that explained several potential sites, already owned by NFLT, that could present opportunities for increasing public access to waterways. Several of the locations on the map have less potential than others; Bogey Creek Preserve and Pescatello Island demonstrate less promise than the Atlantic Beach/JLC Suncoast/River Branch Island Preserve and Ortega River sites. He stated that the potential Ortega River project is the most immediate; this project had previously been put on hold due to the widening of Collins Road at the site.

Dr. DeFoor stated that he supported reigniting an effort to preserve wetlands in the southeast quadrant of Duval County, which he believed to be a continuation of Mayor John Delaney's work. CM Peluso asked Dr. DeFoor about the possibility of recreating referendums that had been discussed in Nassau and Clay Counties to raise funds to secure conservation efforts. Dr. DeFoor stated that he would be happy to go through a similar process in Duval County; Nassau's current referendum is polling around 58%, and Clay's is polling around 60%. He stated that he believes that people are ready to dedicate funding to conservation efforts. He added that conservation can raise property values, citing Central Park as a once-ambitious idea. CM Peluso asked whether the issuance of bonds to conserve wetlands would require a dedicated funding source; Dr. DeFoor stated that details of a potential referendum would be worked out by NFLT staff.

Lisa Rinamen, Jacksonville Riverkeeper, asked Dr. DeFoor whether he could expound on the water quality benefits to conservation efforts. Dr. DeFoor stated that he has personal connection to resiliency efforts and stated that conserving wetlands benefits water quality in waters upstream. He added that water quality and economic value derived from the waterways are deeply connected, pointing out that the fishing economy relies on clean waters.

Wayne Young, Vice President of Environmental Services of JEA, asked how Duval County's share of public versus private waterfront lands compared to other Florida counties; Dr. DeFoor stated that Duval County has one of the highest dedicated proportions of public park land in the County, and that much more waterfront land is publicly owned compared to Nassau County. Dr. DeFoor added that while Duval County a strong portfolio of publicly-owned waterfront lands, deferred maintenance on public lands has reduced public access.

Adam Hoyles, ex-officio member of JWC, asked whether the City was supportive of potential modifications made to Collins Road as a part of the Ortega River Project, and Dr. DeFoor stated that it was; NFLT was just waiting the City to finish construction on right-of-way. Jon Michael Barker, JWC Commissioner, asked about another potential access point on Collins Road that had been held up by the

City's needing state approval for construction on this access point. Brian Burket, Waterfront Project Manager, clarified that these were different projects and that the one presented by Dr. DeFoor only abutted City roads and thus did not need state approval.

Doug Conkey, Intergovernmental Coordinator for St. Johns Water Management District ("SJWMD"), stated that thinking regionally about resiliency is key to success, as Clay, Nassau, St. Johns, and counties further south all have an impact on water quality in Duval County. He added that conservation had become popular among capital investors and that there was potential synergy with the private and public spheres working together to conserve wetlands.

Lisa Rinamen asked how NFLT prioritized its purchasing of land, and Dr. DeFoor stated that NFLT seeks to secure funding before it prioritizes which lands it will purchase. He explained historical background about how the Everglades became the nationally-valued piece of land that it is now; he stated that it was a goal of the John Delaney Mayoral administration to make the St. Johns River system similarly regarded but that this goal had not yet been achieved. He added that those who spearheaded Everglades conservation efforts understood that a failure to protect the wetlands would bring economic activity in the region to a halt.

Lisa Rinamen asked whether any organization, whether the NFLT or Environmental Quality Division within the City, had deeply considered the looming issue of saltwater intrusion into the river system. She stated that there were few regulatory tools that helped to mitigate this issue. Cori Hermle, SJWMD, stated that they are aware of saltwater intrusion and are looking into solutions to prevent any future shortages in water supply. She answered that most tests to gauge saltwater intrusion were done at the groundwater level and not the surface water level but that SJWMD was working on creating a continuous model that accounted for all elements of the river system. Dr. Gerry Pinto, Jacksonville University, asked whether SJWMD had a timeline on the potential release of this model, and Ms. Hermle responded that the model was still in the data collection phase but anticipated that it would be released no later than 2027-2028. CM Peluso requested that SJWMD remain in communication with the City about any projects that it is undertaking regarding the river system. He also emphasized that water supply issue will be a very important issue over the next few decades.

Lisa Rinamen asked whether the purchase of wetlands would help the City add water-quality credits for Basin Management Action Plan purposes, and Melissa Long, Chief of Environmental Quality, responded that most purchases did not result in gaining additional water quality credits.

CM Peluso asked Dr. DeFoor whether the Ortega River project is the furthest along of the potential projects that Dr. DeFoor presented, and Dr. DeFoor confirmed that it was. CM Peluso asked how quickly NFLT could help to put together a referendum regarding wetland conservation funds, and Dr. DeFoor responded that NFLT could help to put together a referendum quickly but that he would prefer to get a potential referendum on the ballot in a year with high voter turnout.

CM Peluso asked whether there was any metric that the City used to determine whether public access was sufficient; for example, the City could set as a goal to have an access point every 8 or so miles. Brian Burket, Waterfront Projects Manager, responded that the City had as a general goal to have an access point within a day's paddle. He added that private developers sometimes present opportunities to increase public access when they develop on waterfront lands. Mr. Burket explained that the City has a document about potential waterfront land acquisitions, and CM Peluso stated that he would be interested in seeing this document. Doug Conkey, SJWMD, added that tributaries also present public access opportunities.

CM Peluso stated that the next meeting for this task force could be March 22, 2024, and that a goal of a future meeting would be to begin to discuss which efforts should be included in a potential new River Accord. Lisa Rinamen said that efforts to ensure the health of tributaries should be more of a goal in a new River Accord than in the previous River Accord, citing high levels of saltwater intrusion and high levels of fecal coliform bacteria as issues that tributaries are facing. She noted that biosolids in tributaries could be a useful presentation topic for the task force.

Wayne Young, JEA, stated that Kurt Wilson would be JEA's representative for the task force moving forward. Lisa Rinamen asked whether JEA was prepared to discuss pipe leakage discussed in the previous task force meeting, and Mr. Young stated that JEA would have information on this issue for the March meeting. Ms. Rinamen asked whether JEA was meeting their water quality credit obligations under the existing Basin Management Action Plan, and Mr. Young stated that they were. Dr. Pinto asked whether the City was currently meeting its obligation through the credits for which it had traded, and Melissa Long explained that the City had traded for 75 metric tons of credits to meet its obligation. She stated that the Department of Environmental Quality could provide a presentation on water quality credits, possibly in April. Dr. Pinto suggested that leakage detection could also be a subject for a presentation, and Doug Conkey suggested that the Resiliency team could be involved in this presentation.

Public Comment:

John Nooney thanked NFLT and Dr. Allison DeFoor for performing a site inspection on a property on Pottsburg Creek that he believes could be purchased through the City through FEMA's repetitive loss properties program and turned into a public park. He noted that he was looking for a sponsor for such action and that no one else had been willing to do a site inspection.

Meeting adjourned: 11:14 a.m.

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