

Water Beyond Borders

**A Report of the
Natural Resources Committee**

Regional Community Institute of Northeast Florida, Inc.
September 2017

Summary

The Regional Community Institute of Northeast Florida, Inc. (RCI) is a non-profit organization created by the Northeast Florida Regional Council (NEFRC) to consider policy issues. In October 2011, RCI and NEFRC collaborated with the people of Northeast Florida on First Coast Vision, a vision for growth and development in Northeast Florida for the next 50 years. The vision asked what the First Coast could be like in 2060 when it came to nature. First Coast Vision answered: “Nowhere are our assets more obvious than in our natural environment and we embrace the challenge of ensuring that they are protected in the long term.” The vision supports water conservation, green infrastructure, and the importance of waterbodies meeting water quality standards. The vision was then incorporated into the Northeast Florida Strategic Regional Policy Plan (SRPP). The Natural Resources Element of the Plan includes policies specific to enhancing water quantity by encouraging conservation and using best management practices such as low impact development, as well as policies specific to protecting water quality. SRPP Natural Resources Element Policy 28 is an overarching statement of the Plan’s approach: “The Region is committed to considering the integrity of ecosystems to be as valuable to the Region as economic growth, as they are interdependent.” As an implementation step, in August 2015, NEFRC assigned water as the 2017 policy issue to RCI, after collaboration with the RCI Board of Directors, and agreed that the efforts should include both Northeast Florida and Southeast Georgia.

RCI assigned the topic to its Natural Resources Committee, led by Professor Quinton White of the Marine Science Research Institute of Jacksonville University. After a crowded brainstorming session with many engaged volunteers and experts, the committee agreed to spend its time learning what it could about how much water we have and where it is, what data we collect on quantity and the compatibility of data among collecting entities, best practices in all aspects of water quantity and quality, what data we collect on water quality and how it is shared, and how we communicate. Pivotal to all of these conversations was the notion that interstate cooperation could increase our effectiveness by increasing our constituency, broadening our best practice and lessons learned experience, and ensuring that the opportunities presented by each State’s good practices could be shared and regularly communicated by our partnership. The Committee met eight times, twice in Kingsland, Georgia, and is grateful for the dedication of its participants as well as the hospitality of the Camden County Public Library and the Camden County Planning and Development Department. Ultimately, the Committee decided on three areas where recommended action would be doable, as a guiding tenant of the Regional Community Institute is that their plan recommendations be doable by committed partners now. Subcommittees will convene to ensure plan implementation.

Regional Action Plan



Study Area: The Northeast Florida Counties of Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, Putnam and St. Johns and the St. Marys River Basin, located in Ware, Camden and Charlton Counties in Georgia.

Action Items:

Interstate Coordination

The Water Committee determined that an action plan including the two states would have a unique ability to demonstrate that water issues are universal and boundaries need not be barriers. Willing communities can address water issues because they believe them to be important, regardless of location.

The St. Marys River presents an opportunity to focus on a river shared by Florida and Georgia. Part of the problem is that one state's water quality sampling standards see it as impaired while the other does not. This runs the risk of inconsistent approaches and varying levels of attention to a river that all agree is not irrevocably impaired and is eminently appropriate for care and restoration. Like all rivers in areas with development pressures, it may be imperiled, but joint action now could restore and maintain the health of the St. Marys River. Best practices and lessons learned from our actions could prove a model for other communities.¹



Photo courtesy of the St Marys Riverkeeper Facebook photo gallery

We will:

- With the partnership of the St. Marys River Management Committee and the St. Marys Riverkeeper, the RCI Water Committee will CONVENE advocates, landowners, local governments, residents and businesses every two years. The meetings will include updates and reports on water quantity and quality as well as how such data is gathered and shared. It will

¹ "Impaired waters", an EPA report required by the CWA, and based upon water quality data submitted by the States (303d) and (305b), show levels of pollutants that do not meet water quality standards given the river's state's designated use of recreation. The Committee found that while different water quality sampling standards of Florida and Georgia varied, the EPA determined from data submitted by each State required the St. Marys River to be impaired given its designated use. The Committee uses the term imperiled to mean a water body that is trending toward impairment, or greater impairment.

provide an overview of relevant land use changes contemplated and enacted since the last meeting. The meeting will also cover issues believed to be pertinent. Partners will end the meeting by attempting to synthesize what has been learned. After the meeting, a meeting summary will be produced and made available to the public and media.

- One potential output of the convening of stakeholders would be a draft FLORIDA GEORGIA COMPACT. This document could outline the interstate cooperation that the Water Committee recommends in order to protect the St. Marys River. It should cover, at a minimum, water quantity and quality testing, data sharing, communication and policy and be provided to each state for consideration.

Data and Monitoring

The Water Committee found that a resource exists to share data on water quality and quantity (STORET) but that its usefulness can only be maximized if the storage is supplemented by a structure that ensures that the appropriate sites are monitored, all the entities monitoring coordinate on timing, approach and results, and there is regular communication to discuss findings and next steps.



Photo courtesy of the St. Johns River Water Management District

We will:

- Beginning with the St. Marys River, determine historic and current sites monitored, when, by whom, and for what. This information will be posted on a CLEARINGHOUSE that includes instructions for anyone interested to access all data on water quantity and quality. This will lead to a determination of what additional monitoring is needed, and whether current partners can do it. If there is a need, it is shared with partners and at a minimum, aired at the next convening.
- To the extent possible, STANDARDIZE water quality monitoring so that each site visit samples consistently, using approaches that are agreed upon and will meet the needs of the testing agency and other partners.

- Use the Federal “impairment” process as an opportunity/ catalyst to watch water quality trends in the St. Marys and address them before a problem occurs. As the process identifies challenges, CONVENE the regulatory agencies and advocates to determine solutions. Make these known to the public and the media.
- Make the CLEARINGHOUSE regional, to include the entire Water Committee Study Area.
- As partners increase communication and efficiency, convene to consider whether there are MORE EFFICIENT METHODS to monitor water quality and quantity. Consider the St. Johns River Water Management District’s approach to minimum flows and levels and the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers approach to Everglades performance, for example.

Local Government and Planning

The Strategic Regional Policy Plan Natural Resources Element Policy 18 says that “The NEFRC supports local government efforts to reduce impervious surfaces, encourage infill and redevelopment and use low impact development practices in the Region.” The Water Committee did not find a local community with an implemented Low Impact Development (LID) ordinance that it wished to recommend as a model for local governments considering such an ordinance. It did, however, hear that many communities have discussed the need for low impact development and have made some good decisions that align with best practices related to water conservation and preservation of water quality.



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We will:

- Review BEST PRACTICES that include: density and clustering bonuses being considered on Cumberland Island, Article 9 of the Camden County Uniform Land Development Code, the techniques used in Nocatee in St. Johns County, the LID handbook developed by the City of Jacksonville, and approaches and LID ordinances of other communities.

- Create a MODEL LID ORDINANCE example/template suitable for the Water Committee Study Area.
- Assemble DATA on the economic benefits of LID using a cost/benefit focus that includes benefits to communities using the Community Rating System and the potential for Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) water quality credits.
- DISTRIBUTE the model LID ordinance to all the local governments in the Study Area.
- ADVOCATE for consideration of the model LID ordinance, through an Op Ed, press release, and attendance at city and county government meetings as requested.

Acknowledgements

The Water Committee is grateful to the following regional leaders who did presentations to the Committee, providing vital baseline information to inform the recommendations.

- P. Scott Laidlaw, P.G., Chief, Bureau of Water Supply Planning, St. Johns River Water Management District
- John Myers, Esq., Co-Chair, St. Marys River Management Committee

The Water Committee found success by assembling smart, engaged and passionate citizens of the region to determine what was both right to do and doable in the Study Area. Largely, they found each other and brought their peers to the table. The Committee is indebted to the following extraordinary regional leaders:

- Mike Adams, Senior Florida Representative, Field Conservation, Defenders of Wildlife
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- Kaitlyn Dietz, CTP Specialist, GTMNERR
- Krista Fogarty, City Planner, City of Jacksonville, Planning & Development Department
- Rick Frey, St. Marys Riverkeeper, St. Marys Riverkeeper, Inc.
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- Adam Mengel, Planning Director, Flagler County
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- Bob Rhodes, Attorney, Board Member, Regional Community Institute
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- Brian Teeple, CEO, Northeast Florida Regional Council
- A. Quinton White, Jr. Ph.D., Marine Science Research Institute, JU, Committee Chair
- Ashby Worley, Coastal Resilience Manager, The Nature Conservancy, Georgia