

Audubon of Florida

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E. Governmental Coordination

Governmental coordination concerning manatees typically consists of three inter-related components: 1) Coordination during the review of proposed facilities; 2) Long-range planning that will allow future development to take place in a manner that ensures adequate protection for manatees; and 3) Coordination with state and federal wildlife protection agencies. Both these topics are discussed in this section.

In addition to St. Johns County, there are three municipal governments within St. Johns County; the City of St. Augustine, the City of St. Augustine Beach and the Town of Hastings. Presently, there appears to be little coordination and communication between the cities and the County regarding the protection of manatees and their habitat. However, all boat docks, marinas and similar facilities must be permitted through the state and federal agencies previously identified, and the County and municipalities are offered opportunities to comment on permit applications within their jurisdictional boundaries.

Permit Procedures and Development Review

Currently waterfront projects that involve new construction or renovation of existing facilities are regulated through a myriad of federal, state, regional and local regulations. Although each level of government has adopted its own review criteria and permitting standards, prior to construction (unless otherwise meeting exemption criteria) a project that is proposed to be conducted within manatee habitat typically must receive multiple approvals and meet the most stringent of all applicable review criteria.

At the federal level the ACOE is the lead agency in reviewing and permitting most waterfront development/construction projects. Depending on various project thresholds (e.g., number of slips, shoreline frontage, surface area over water, presence/absence of submerged resources, etc.), projects may also undergo review by the FWS for potential impacts to federally designated endangered and threatened species, including manatees. Also depending on project thresholds, copies of permit applications and/or Public Notice summaries of projects may be transmitted to St. Johns County for review and comment.

At the regional and state level, FDEP and SFWMD share responsibilities for reviewing and permitting waterfront development/construction projects. Depending on various thresholds, projects may undergo review by the FWC for potential impacts to state-designated endangered and threatened species. Also depending on project thresholds, copies of permit applications and/or Public Notice summaries of projects may be transmitted to St. Johns County for review and comment.

In addition to these federal and state permitting processes, most waterfront development/construction projects also require that St. Johns County (or the applicable municipality) review the proposed development and issue the necessary permits/approvals prior to construction. Review within St. Johns County routinely involves staff from a variety of Departments in determining if the project is consistent with the Comp Plan and applicable Land Development Regulations and Ordinances. Depending on the magnitude of the proposed project, approvals may be required at one or more of the following levels: Development Review Committee, Local Planning and Zoning Board, and Board of County Commissioners. If the county determines that a proposed project does not meet the applicable Comprehensive Plan elements or Land Development Regulations, the project may be denied or returned to the applicant for revisions.

Long-range Planning - St. Johns County Water Dependent Use Study

St. Johns County is currently experiencing tremendous population growth. In order to assist the County in ensuring that adequate facilities will be in place to allow residents access to the county's public waterways, in 2002, St. Johns County contracted with Applied Technology and Management, Inc. (ATM) to identify and inventory existing water-dependent uses that were present within the County. The stated purpose of the study was to "...identify the future needs of St. Johns County for docks, ramps, public and new commercial marinas (wet and dry slips) based on the projected need, location and environmental constraints" (ATM, 2002). To fulfill this goal, ATM performed the following:

- Inventoried existing boat-related facilities, which were presented based on four regions:
 - Intracoastal Waterway North
 - Intracoastal Waterway South
 - St. Johns River North
 - St. Johns River South
- Identified present and future demand for water access, including analyzing the need for
 - Marina slips
 - Boat ramps
 - Private docks
 - Commercial boatyards and associated docks
- Identified boater activity patterns based on trip originations and destinations
- Developed a protocol for identifying site suitability based on
 - Environmental considerations
 - Developmental considerations
 - Potentially competing shoreline uses
- Analyzed existing Land Development Regulations (LDR's) and developed recommendations for modifications that would ensure continued public access to the waters
- Developed a Marine Facility Siting, Planning, Implementation and Control Manual, which consisted of :
 - A Marina Screening Checklist
 - An analysis of potential impacts on water quality, social issues and the local economy
 - An identification of mitigative measures that would minimize adverse environmental consequences
 - A summary of various design, construction and performance standards.

In October 2002, ATM provided a final report to the County. The study, which was accepted by the County Commission, is included in electronic format in Appendix G. The major conclusions and recommendations of the study were that:

“St. John’s County is one of the most rapidly growing counties in the state. As the population increases as much as 60% by 2015, the demand for new and expanded water dependent use facilities such as marinas and boat ramps will rise as well. To meet this demand, St. Johns County officials must begin to plan for these requirements immediately. Information provided in this study report is summarized below along with recommendations to assist the County.

- In 2000/2001, there were a total of 10,073 registered vessels in St. Johns County. That number is six predicted to increase to 15,564 vessels by 2015, an increase of nearly 65%.
- There are currently 1054, wet slips at marinas located within St. Johns County. Based on current boat registration and population trends, an increase of 575 slips will be needed to keep up with the existing level of availability by 2015.
- There is an anticipated future demand of as many as 14 new boat ramp lanes (a ramp may have more than one lane) and 718 parking spaces by the year 2015. Much of this demand may be met by expansion and upgrading of existing facilities. Some additional facilities will be required in regions showing future high use.
- Based on current permitting trends, it is estimated that an additional 375 private residential docks will be constructed by 2015, bringing the total from approximately 1200 in 2000 to 1575 in the year 2015.
- There are currently 400 dry boat storage units at marinas located in St. Johns County. Based on current boat registration and population trends, an increase of 218 units will be needed to keep up with the existing level of availability by 2015.
- The majority of wet slip holders in St. Johns County marinas are from outside of the County. As the county continues to grow, this relationship should swing back to St. Johns County registered vessels.
- Expansion and new construction potential for boat ramps is shown in Figures 21 through 24 in Appendix E Water-Dependent Uses Study. Expansion and new construction potential for marinas is shown in Appendix E, Figures 25 through 28. The potential for each location was based on suitability ratings as well as an evaluation conducted during site visits as part of this study.
- Two areas of the county are particularly in need of new facilities. The northern portion of the Intracoastal Waterway region (ICW-N1) has lost its only public boat ramp due to construction of the new Palm of Valley Bridge. Establishment of a new replacement ramp is critical in this area.

(Subsequent to the development of the Water Dependent Uses Study, this ramp was replaced and so a single-lane public ramp does exist in this area. This single lane, however, does not meet the long-range needs of the County for this area.)

- The northwestern portion of the County (SJR-N) has no launch facilities. Several new residential developments will be coming on line in the near future and will require construction of new facilities. The county should be actively looking for available land to construct a new ramp. There is currently one facility (Amity Inn Anchorage) that the county should investigate purchasing.
- The central portion of the Intracoastal Waterway-North region (ICW-N2) has two locations, which may be available for expansion. Oscars Fish Camp has an existing ramp that could be expanded by the County. Another option is to seek agreement with the St. Augustine Boating Club and combined their ramp with the County's adjacent Boating Club Road Ramp. One large ramp would be more beneficial than two smaller, inefficient ramps. A level "A" ramp in this area would greatly reduce the crowding at the Vilano Boat Basin ramp. This sub-region is considered poor for any new construction, so expansion of existing facilities is critical.
- Frank Butler Park in the southern portion of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW-S) is ideal for expansion. Sufficient land exists for upland areas, and the water access can be easily improved. Expansion of this ramp would greatly alleviate crowding at the Vilano Boat Basin and other ramps.
- Two existing ramps on the St. Johns River are ideal for expansion. Palmo boat ramp has sufficient upland areas available to increase parking, and make it more user-friendly. Expansion and improvement of Riverdale Park is critical to meet future demands for boat ramps.
- St. Johns County should begin searching for parcels for future development of a ramp facility in the southern portion of the St. Johns River (SJR-S 2 & 3). While the demand in these areas is currently low, future growth will undoubtedly occur.
- The extreme southern portions of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW-S 2 & 3) are some of the most environmentally sensitive in the County. In addition to Aquatic Preserves and protected waters, these sub-regions are active shellfishing areas and Class II waters. Therefore, these sub-regions are considered or for construction of new facilities.
- Care must be taken to utilize the remaining available parcels in the most efficient manner. Areas that meet the rigorous demands for marinas and ramps should be utilized for that purpose almost exclusively since the availability of these parcels is becoming scarce. Purchase of a parcel that meets the requirements for a new ramp, and then using the upland areas for playgrounds and picnic areas instead of trailer parking is not efficient use of the property. While these facilities are as important as boat ramps,

they should be constructed on parcels that do not meet the criteria for water depended uses.”

Updates of this 2001-2 report are not within the scope of the existing MPP development work effort.

Coordination with State and Federal Wildlife Protection Agencies

Aside from coordination between SJCSO and FWC law enforcement personnel, there is presently no coordination between the County and state or federal manatee protection agencies.

RECOMMENDED ACTION PLAN

In this Section, the results of analyses of existing conditions are used to develop and describe a comprehensive program to protect manatees and their habitat in St. Johns County while minimizing the impacts to boaters and owners of waterfront property. The goal of this MPP is to maintain or decrease the already low level of watercraft-related manatee mortalities in St. Johns County in order to keep the USFWS designation of St. Johns County as 'medium risk' for manatees.

Because watercraft-related manatee mortality in St. Johns County has been minimal (i.e., less than one/yr as an average over any ten-year period), no new zones are proposed and no changes are recommended to the current speed restriction zones. Recommendations are made, however, for a variety of actions the County could pursue when/if the rates of watercraft and/or other human-related manatee mortality increase or if the Commission chooses to do so.

Opportunities are identified and suggested for initiatives that will enhance public education and awareness about manatees and their habitat. Potential funding sources, including federal and state governmental entities and non-governmental organizations (i.e., foundations, trusts) that may provide financial assistance toward implementing components of this plan are also identified.

Because a significant proportion of manatee-related activities are beyond the sole control of St. Johns County, this Section also describes a process for enhancing inter-governmental communication and coordination.

A. Habitat Protection

This Section identifies and describes recommendations for initiatives that will maintain and enhance manatee habitat in St. Johns County.

1. Foraging Habitat

Analysis of manatee sighting records and the results of vegetation mapping suggest that relatively little is known about the foraging habits and habitats of manatees in St. Johns County. To address these shortcomings, the County could consider enlisting the support of environmental professional(s) and/or volunteers who would work under the direction of a suitably qualified environmental professional. Monitors could (with advance concurrence by FWC and FWS) follow individual manatees and, following a monitoring protocol, document foraging activities and other behavior. Understanding the feeding behavior and food resources (i.e., type, abundance, distribution, seasonal variation...) that are available at different times of the year would enhance the County's ability to protect manatees while they are in County waters. If and when such a study is developed and implemented, it should be developed and implemented in coordination with FWC and FWS. Due to the apparent higher numbers of manatees, it is suggested that implementing such a study in the St. Johns River would be a higher priority than the Matanzas-Tolomato-AICW complex. With adequate supervision, such a study could be conducted by volunteers with supervision by Sea Grant and/or GTMNERR staff.