

St. Johns County 2025 Budget Address
Joy Andrews, County Administrator
July 16, 2024

Chair Arnold, Vice Chair Alaimo, Commissioners, Community Partners, and Staff,

Good morning and thank you all for being here today.

Today, I am honored to present you the 2025 budget recommendation for St. Johns County. This budget reflects our commitment to fulfilling the promises we made to our residents, staff, and partners, while positioning our county for continued success.

Board Vision and Leadership:

The leadership and vision of our Board of County Commissioners have guided us in focusing on these key priorities:

- Infrastructure
- Managing the Growth
- Open Governance & Transparency
- Conservation
- Financial Stewardship

These priorities have resulted in significant achievements in 2024:

- CR 210 widening (Cimarron to Greenbrier, and East of I-95)
- \$9.6M state allocation for Airport Authority
- An ongoing robust publicly informed process for Comprehensive Plan 2050
- Draft five-year Strategic Plan
- Increased Land Acquisition Management plan funding from \$500K to \$2 million for conservation
- Public Safety, Parks, and Library Bonding Program

This budget recommendation maintains our focus on essential services and introduces strategic investments that will benefit our community for years to come, primarily in roads, water, parks, libraries, public safety, and in our staff. These long-term investments are proposed based on your methodical deliberation over the past few months and the bold decisions you are making to move us forward. I would like to take a few minutes to highlight these strategic commitments that you, as a Board, have made and continue to make into the future, and the quality services to our residents that result from those commitments.

Public Safety and Coastal Management:

Last year, we promised to enhance our emergency response capabilities. We are keeping that promise with an increased allocation to expand our Emergency Management Services and

support our dedicated first responders. This includes the funding of five new fire stations and increasing the starting salary of new hires with the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office to \$55,000. Additionally, we have successfully activated the Emergency Operations Center in response to Hurricane Idalia and implemented a Hazard Mitigation Grant to install a generator at Freedom Crossing Academy. We are also nearing completion of Fire Station 11 (expected August/September 2024).

Our Animal Control Division has been active in rescuing animals, hosting adoption events, and improving safety at our Pet Center. We have also assisted neighboring counties with animal welfare initiatives and continue to promote pet adoptions through various community events.

Infrastructure:

Our commitment to catching up our county's infrastructure remains our highest priority. We have allocated significant funds for road repairs, bridge maintenance, and new construction projects. Notably, we are continuing the widening of CR 210 between Cimarron and Greenbrier, as well as east of I-95 from two to six lanes. Additional projects include:

- SR 207 Water Reclamation Facility (WRF)
- SR 16 Reclaimed Water Transmission Main
- Investing \$15 million in Capital Improvement Projects (CIPs) in Hastings
- Over 200 manhole improvements
- new Utility Lab
- investment of our software infrastructure of the new Enterprise Resource Planning tool.
- Sheriff's tactical training facility

These investments are critical for supporting our growing population and ensuring safe and reliable transportation networks.

Managing the Growth:

To effectively manage our growth, staff from Growth Management are actively carrying out the Mobility Fee Study and Impact Fee Update and are overseeing the extension of Veterans Parkway. Our new web-based Clearance Sheet portal has streamlined processes, and we are continuing to update our Comprehensive Plan.

I have heard the Board loud and clear that you want to hold the developers accountable and maximizing developer impact fee collection. Today, I am making a major policy recommendation, that is to remove the 40% commercial impact fee buy down program through an ordinance adopted by previous boards, so that the property taxes are not used to provide the commercial developers a 60% discount on their impact fee obligation. This recommendation is reflected in my budget recommendation with a saving of \$2.5 Million in general fund.

Open Governance and Transparency:

During this year, we worked hard to deliver an open and transparent government to you and our community as we have promised. Among many initiatives, the one we are most proud of, and the one we are most thankful for your trust in, is the complete revamp of our administrative budget hearing sessions. Your support gave us the space we needed to bring all 28 sessions of budget dialogue in front of our residents. I won't lie, I was nervous about this new process, but I am relieved to report to you that the feedback is positive. The new way of communication is open, and trust is being reestablished. We could not have deployed this new tool without your full support, and the hard work of staff from OMB, Public Affairs, and the rest of the directors of our operational divisions.

Since the creation of the Office of Performance & Transparency, we have fully launched on Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) planning, with an implementation cost of \$3.4 million over three years. Our Public Affairs team created a new County website, launched a bilingual monthly newsletter, and launched the SJC Connect mobile app. The SJC Citizens Academy pilot program and over 200 videos produced by the Office of Public Affairs are also among most notable achievements.

Financial Stewardship:

We acknowledge the challenges we are working through, including the need to continue our investment in catching up on capital projects. The Board unanimously gave us direction to move forward with a \$144 million multi-phased bond program for the development of 4 regional parks, 2 library hubs with 1 full library, and 4 fire stations, leveraging impact fees, state allocations, and Tourism Taxes. It is our commitment to you, Board members, that we are working diligently to evaluate every dollar when it comes to the costs of building these long-anticipated facilities. Our goal is to come back before you in September with rigorously pursued savings of 15% through uncompromising negotiation and strong project management. Our goal is to realize a saving of over \$20 million.

Since the Board's support of the Intergovernmental Affairs office creation, it has secured over \$170 million in state and federal funds for St. Johns County in the past two years. We have also established a public-private partnership (P3) with a 501(c)3 to manage The Amp and Ponte Vedra Concert Hall, and we are undergoing an Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating review with the goal of achieving significant cost savings for resident property owners and business owners.

Internally, the Facilities Management team has launched the SJC Energy Conservation Program. This program aims to optimize energy usage across all county-owned properties by implementing energy-saving projects, managing building schedules, and encouraging responsible energy use among county staff. The program is managed by the Facilities Management Department and includes key personnel responsible for overseeing and implementing energy reduction principles, including HVAC scheduling, lighting management, water usage, and building envelope maintenance. This initiative is part of our ongoing efforts to enhance sustainability and reduce operational costs.

Today we present you a budget recommendation with a firm goal of reaching a 15% increase in our discretionary reserve, which is the safety net our community needed as we stepping into this active hurricane season.

Community Services:

Our Veterans Services office assisted 3,782 veterans with claims to the VA, resulting in over \$237 million in VA benefits awarded to St. Johns County veterans.

The Health & Human Services department finalized 43 adoptions, partnered with the SJSO Re-Entry Center to serve 139 inmates, and provided emergency rental assistance to 398 households. Our CDBG funded tutor program helped 129 children and provided housing counseling to 206 residents, resulting in \$2 million in mortgages.

Our commitment to providing affordable housing options continues. We have broken ground for constructing 92 affordable multifamily units with Ability Housing and received \$9,465,879.33 in FEMA reimbursements. The Victoria Crossing Affordable Housing Complex is now 100% leased, and we completed the final home for the Restore St. Johns project. Our Social Services Division has served over 10,620 clients and provided extensive housing counseling services.

Quality of Life:

We continue to invest in our parks and recreational facilities, with projects including the renovation of Vilano Beach Oceanfront Park and shoreline restoration at Alpine Groves. The construction of Mill Creek Park is underway, and we have ranked #1 for FCT grant funding for the San Sebastian Boat Ramp (\$3.5 million). The library system has expanded service hours to provide access 7 days a week and served 555 children in collaboration with the Parks & Recreation summer camp program. A replacement bookmobile is anticipated to arrive this fall, and we have designed the Hastings Community Center and Library.

Development and Internal Services:

Our tourism economy continues to thrive, with a 2% increase in tax revenue this year and a 62% increase since 2019. We have invested in over 48 cultural, beach, and sports tourism programs and events, increased investment in destination marketing, and hosted the Fort Mose Jazz and Blues Series and Sing Out Loud Festival. We are also working with local partners to become a Certified Autism Destination. The Economic Development office has created a strategic master plan and assisted in community engagement, planning, and acquisition of World Golf Foundation assets, adding 639 high-quality jobs through multiple projects including Acadia Healthcare Company and many others. Furthermore, we secured \$9.6 million in funding for the Airport Authority Project.

Conservation:

We heard the Board's priority on conservation and natural resource protection. We have submitted multiple large grant applications to acquire LAMP properties and critical beach dune

habitats by leveraging non-property tax funding. We are working to acquire funding and facilitate partnerships to conserve the Matanzas River Estuary Habitat and promote water conservation through our Utility Department. We are also examining the opportunity for a conservation impact fee paid by development. We are prepared to provide the Board with a comprehensive overview of our past and present conservation efforts which are critically important and strategically thought out with maximized conservation and without place property tax burden on our local residents. Additionally, our budget recommendation today for 2025 includes a \$2 MM funding for the County LAMP (Land Acquisition Management Program).

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The community partnerships we have continue to foster and rely on are crucial to our success. We are launching a new West Augustine Affordable Housing pilot Program. Task force is formed to develop a program utilizing county-owned lots in West Augustine and to provide funding through the Community Redevelopment Area toward a homebuyer program. Today we recommend a West Augustine Housing Trust Fund with an initial allocation of \$650,000 funded by CRA TIF, to provide support for planning and road access.

West Augustine community leaders, and the Parks Foundation collaborated on a plan to successfully relocate this historically significant structure Canright House.

Moving Ahead:

Our bond program for Public Safety, Parks and Recreation, and Library investments will be finalized in September. The South Ponte Vedra Army Corps Feasibility Study is complete, and we are progressing with the completion of a congressional work plan. This is a significant step toward our 50-year sustainability plan.

We are proud to announce that St. Johns County has been ranked #1 by the Black History Museum Task Force and selected as the location of the Florida Black History Museum.

I would like to extend my gratitude to our budget team, department heads, and community partners who have contributed to this comprehensive budget proposal. Your hard work and collaboration have been instrumental.

To the Board of County Commissioners, thank you for your ongoing support and trust in your staff. As we enter the final year of our two-year phase of inflation catch-up, I recommend a 7.5% cost of living adjustment for all BOCC employees. This adjustment is aimed at improving retention and helping our staff confront the rising cost of living. It ensures that our employees are adequately supported and that their contributions are valued in light of the economic challenges faced in previous years.

Together, we are making strategic investments that will ensure the prosperity and well-being of St. Johns County residents and employees.

To our residents, thank you for your trust and on-going engagement in this budget process. This budget reflects our commitment to listening to your needs and working tirelessly to build a future where only your needs and expectations are the consideration.

We stand here today, confident in the knowledge that the investments we make today will pave the way for a stronger, more resilient St. Johns County.

With that I would like to hand the next part of the presentation to our Office of Management and Budget Director, Mr. Jesse Dunn. He will walk us through the statutorily prescribed first of three-step budget process.

Thank you.