

viewpoint

OPINIONS PAGE BLOG

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Dredging the river deserves a full vetting

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lisa
rinaman

JaxPort is currently attempting to pull one over on this community — an attempt that has potentially has grave consequences for our river and local taxpayers.

The port recently announced a new plan to begin the deep dredge later this year without first seeking the consent of the City Council or the buy-in of the public.

This deceptive strategy is a deliberate attempt to avoid scrutiny and the many questions that remain regarding the economic feasibility of the deep dredge project and the damage that will occur to the health of the St. Johns River.

JaxPort knows that it can't dispute the findings by a local logistics expert who clearly demonstrates that the port's job claims and economic projections are unrealistic and significantly overblown.

JaxPort also knows that once the dredging is underway, it will be much more difficult for City Council members to say no when the port seeks city funding in future years to keep the project going.

A QUESTIONABLE FUNDING PLAN

While JaxPort has the funds to start dredging, they have no commitment of funding to complete the project.

JaxPort's "funding plan" relies heavily on future appropriations from the state and City Council with between \$47 and \$157 million eventually coming from local taxpayers.

However, if state and federal funds don't come through as planned, Jacksonville will either face an even greater financial burden or will be left with a dredge to nowhere.

We also know from experience that the cost will likely increase substantially. The last time the river was dredged, the final cost was nearly four times the original projection.

Recently, the Army Corps announced that the cost of Savannah's harbor deepening project had increased by 38 percent.

Jacksonville already has a significant backlog of unfunded infrastructure projects that includes streets, bridges, sidewalks and drainage.

In addition, it is estimated to cost up to \$700 million just to remove failing septic tanks that are polluting our river. What

JaxPort is attempting to pull one over on the citizens of Jacksonville.

public services and projects that benefit our quality of life, river and local economy will we have to forgo to pay for the dredging and at what cost?

The St. Johns River currently suffers from numerous unresolved pollution problems. The deep dredge would cause significant additional harm to the health of the St. Johns while providing no mitigation to offset the damage.

This would only set us back further, making it much more expensive and difficult to restore the health of our river.

Now is the time for JaxPort to step up and provide mitigation that will actually offset the significant damage that will occur to our river.

The city of Jacksonville, the JAX Chamber, the Port Task Force and even JaxPort previously acknowledged the need for more mitigation when they all endorsed a plan to restore the Ocklawaha River, the largest tributary of the St. Johns.

However, since that time, JaxPort has done nothing to make sure more mitigation is in place to fortify and protect the St. Johns, leaving our river vulnerable to extensive damage from the deep dredge.

Now is the time for JaxPort to provide full disclosure of the total cost of the project and the accuracy of its growth projections.

JaxPort's own strategic plan identifies nearly \$1 billion in landside improvements that would be necessary to meet its eye-popping growth projections.

JaxPort's plan is based on 100 percent growth in the first nine years after dredging, a remarkable feat that no port in Florida has ever even come close to achieving.

Now is also the time for a robust public conversation and comprehensive review of all the pros and cons of the deep dredge.

The project must be fully vetted and all questions answered before a decision is made to move forward with dredging.

We cannot afford to kick the can down the road and allow a potential boondoggle in the making to endanger taxpayers and our St. Johns River.

Lisa Rinaman is the St. Johns Riverkeeper.

It's time to take action to deepen our river

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President John F. Kennedy said "there are risks and costs to action, but they are far less than the long-range risks of

inaction."

Now that we have thoroughly studied and made plans to mitigate potential environmental impacts, it is time to take action to deepen our river to build on JaxPort's \$19 billion strong economic engine. This will significantly expand the local economy, create jobs and add much needed tax revenues for Jacksonville.

Environmental protections and economic sustainability are not mutually exclusive. Case studies of Copenhagen, Denmark's port show a robust economy and a thriving environment can co-exist and complement each other.

Prosperous seaport cities like Seattle, Singapore and Hamburg maintain pristine environments around their ports, which have much larger volumes of cargo than JaxPort.

When companies are located near a port, it reduces the distance a truck must travel, which reduces carbon emissions. JaxPort has the added environmental benefits of a new rail transfer station, three interstate highways and three rail terminals that will further reduce regional emissions.

In the face of clear studies from the Army Corps of Engineers that the environment is not going to be destroyed by the deepening of the river, the St. Johns Riverkeeper has now pivoted from its environmental doom narrative and instead quotes a private consultant to try to cast doubt on the economic benefits that will certainly flow from the port deepening.

The consultant took the position that the "benefit to cost" was negligible. But this flies in the face of the extensive studies undertaken over many years by the non-partisan Corps that demonstrate a benefit-to-cost ratio of a whopping 2.67 to 1.

The Corps studies are a much better indicator of reality since they objectively focused on its service to the United States to "deliver vital public and military engineering services [and to] energize the economy while reducing risks from disasters." The Corps is not being

influenced to please an environmentalist group client, such as the Riverkeeper.

Moreover, with state and federal governments paying a large share of the costs, Jacksonville will see that ratio of benefits skyrocket to as high as 27 to 1, making the investment a home run and one of the easiest and most beneficial decisions a city could make. The positive impacts to the local economy from port expansion will be extensive.

The New York Shipping Association commissioned an economic impact study regarding its port that "confirms for every one job in our port creates almost nine additional jobs in the region."

In 20 years, the deepening of our port would add another \$790 million in yearly tax revenue. To put this in perspective the city's budget is about \$1.2 billion now.

A deeper port will handle larger ships and enhance our logistical advantages in rail and interstate highways. Becoming a "port of entry" into the U.S. will encourage more trade and manufacturing opportunities as businesses desire more efficient supply routes.

Several years ago we were ahead of both the ports of Miami and Fort Lauderdale and were on par with Savannah. Now Miami has finished its expansion and Fort Lauderdale's Port Everglades is almost complete. Savannah is also deepening its port. Yet JaxPort is a better location logistically than our rival cities and has more potential.

To be "America's Logistics Center" takes bold action so future generations can realize its potential. Developing our port is on the same scale of importance as our Navy bases, Downtown redevelopment or improving public schools.

The Chamber of Commerce, First Coast Manufacturers Association, the local business community and most elected officials, both Democrat and Republican, have come out strongly in favor of deepening as they recognize vibrant port cities bring prosperity.

Businesses can't thrive when they are in neutral gear. To prosper, they must move forward.

It is now time for Jacksonville to charge forward.

Bill Spinner is a Jacksonville commercial builder and developer.

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