

Apalachicola Riverkeeper Annual Membership Meeting
Friday, March 13, 2009
Battery Park Community Center
Mayor Van Johnson's Speech

I'm delighted and humbled by the opportunity to address such a distinguished group of environmentalists and concerned citizens.

Tonight, I stand before you to share with you some of the measures the City of Apalachicola have undertaken in recent years to ensure that the pristine waters of the Apalachicola River and Bay remains a healthy and productive estuary.

However, to keep from sounding hypocritical in my presentation, I must first shamefully admit that the city has not always acted as Good Stewards of the environment and because of that, at times found itself at odds with your group and others.

Unfortunately, it took a protracted and costly lawsuit, before city officials became conscious to the fact that we needed to be mindful of our ecosystem and the effects that our action were having on our image and local economy.

At times local government seemed unaware that our history told of how our ancestors carved out and situated this community along the Apalachicola, and how they existed by depending upon the strength and bounty of the River and Bay.

From 1860 through the 1900's, the City of Apalachicola had the distinction of being the third largest cotton port in the southeastern United States. Merchants from as far away as Georgia and Alabama used steamboats to ship cotton down river into the city.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the city's economy evolved into the lumber trade followed by the seafood industry.

Whether commerce at that time consisted of cotton, lumber, or seafood, throughout the history of Apalachicola, the River and Bay remained the one constant that has linked our past to our present and for no other reason it demanded our protection.

However, it took a series of new administrations to raise our awareness to the fact that a city mindful of its past is a city investing in its future.

With this awareness, city officials and staff alike embarked upon a course to make the protection and preservation of our greatest resource a top priority.

During the recent reconstruction of the piers and docks at Lafayette, Battery, and Veterans Riverfront Parks, the city took painstaking measures to ensure that no sea grasses were disturbed, we removed old leaching creosote pilings

and replaced them with concrete and repaired sea walls to avert the negative impact that shoreline erosion can have on the ecosystem.

To improve water quality, the city installed storm-water treatment facilities along Avenue I and at the new parking lot off Market Street. These facilities will catch and treat storm-water runoff before it reaches the River and Bay.

To help promote clean marinas, we have installed pump-out facilities at both the Scipio Creek and Battery Park boat basins, and we applied for and received a Derelict Vessels Removal grant from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to remove sunken boats from our waters and the threat that they pose.

To prevent the hazards associated with waterfront development, the city has utilized funding from the Florida Communities Trust to purchase and preserve environmentally sensitive properties along our working waterfront.

We are also currently in the planning and design stages of converting to a wastewater reclamation system that would make available for use treated wastewater for commercial and residential irrigation.

This system will also afford the city with an opportunity to reduce or altogether eliminate the effluent from our wastewater treatment plant from going into Huckleberry Creek.

However, the most significant initiative undertaken by my administration was entering into the Tri-State water wars litigation, where the city challenged the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers authority to restrict vital freshwater flow down the Apalachicola River Basin.

Because of the irreparable harm imposed upon the ecosystem and our way of life, we felt that it was our obligation to stand up, and fight for the residents of our community, and not relegate our responsibility to do so to others.

The twenty-year old litigation is soon ending, with a favorable ruling expected for both Florida and Alabama.

With our resolve and change in direction, the City of Apalachicola has become Good Stewards of the land.

We sought out and found harmony with our environment, and in return, nature has radiated a light upon our community and has transformed Apalachicola into a shining city by the sea.

Thank you and again I appreciate the opportunity you have given me to address you tonight.