

Research Report: Analysis of Maintenance, Sedimentation, and Ecological Impacts on Sandalwood Canal and Hogpen Creek

Report Date: 2026-05-14

Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the environmental and administrative issues surrounding the Sandalwood Canal and Hogpen Creek in Jacksonville, Florida. Significant sedimentation in Hogpen Creek has severely impacted navigability, ecological health, and residential property access, sparking a protracted dispute between residents and city officials. Investigations reveal that the Sandalwood Canal, a major component of the city's stormwater management system, is widely cited by residents and a former city official as the primary source of sediment-laden discharge into the creek [3].

The City of Jacksonville has historically performed minimal direct maintenance, undertaking a single, preemptive dredging in Hogpen Creek nearly two decades ago following the Sandalwood Canal construction project [1, 2]. The administration currently maintains that the canal was engineered with sediment controls and that ongoing siltation is a result of natural processes, thus absolving the city of responsibility for dredging a waterway that serves private residences [2].

This stance has created significant conflict with affected homeowners, who report drastically reduced water depths, the disappearance of wildlife such as manatees, and foul odors from canal discharge [1, 2]. A city-led attempt to resolve the dredging issue by creating a special taxing district for the 111 affected property owners failed in late 2024 after intense public backlash over the proposed \$4,500 annual assessment per household [3, 4]. In response to the ongoing controversy, a city council member has pledged to secure funding for a detailed watershed analysis to definitively identify the source of the sediment [2]. However, the mayoral administration has indicated it will not proactively fund the study or future dredging, leaving the path to a long-term solution uncertain and contentious [2, 5]. The following sections detail the history of maintenance actions, evidence of sedimentation, documented ecological impacts, and the evolving responses from citizens and government bodies.

Historical Maintenance and Waterway Management

The management and maintenance history of the Sandalwood Canal and Hogpen Creek is characterized by limited direct intervention by the City of Jacksonville, a point of significant contention in the ongoing debate over responsibility for the creek's degradation. The available records and official statements indicate a governmental approach that distinguishes between the obligations for public stormwater infrastructure and the upkeep of natural waterways serving private properties.

The most significant documented maintenance event occurred approximately 18 to 19 years prior to 2026, which aligns with the completion of the Hodges Boulevard/Sandalwood Canal project in 2007. Following this construction, the City of Jacksonville conducted a small-scale dredging project in Hogpen Creek. This action was described as a preemptive measure, intended to address any potential sediment transport that may have resulted from the construction site itself [1, 2]. However, city officials have framed this as a one-time initiative linked to a specific project, not as an acceptance of perpetual

maintenance responsibility for Hogpen Creek. Since that time, there is no documented record of the city performing further dredging or large-scale sediment removal in the creek.

The City of Jacksonville's official policy on waterway maintenance reinforces this position. The city's Public Works Director, Steve Long, and other officials have consistently stated that the city's responsibility for dredging is limited to ensuring access to city-owned and operated boat ramps [3, 4]. As Hogpen Creek primarily provides water access for private residences and their docks, it falls outside the purview of this policy. The Mayor's administration has explicitly stated that it does not intend to use city resources to dredge the creek in the future, adhering to the principle that changes to a natural water body serving private interests are not a public financial obligation [5].

Regarding the Sandalwood Canal itself, the city's position is that maintenance was effectively engineered into its original design. According to Phil Perry, the city's chief communications officer, the canal project completed nearly two decades ago was constructed with weirs, which are structures designed to retain sediment and prevent it from flowing downstream into Hogpen Creek [2]. From the city's perspective, this engineering feature constitutes its primary contribution to controlling sediment transport from the canal. The city asserts that this design feature is functioning as intended and that any siltation observed since its completion is attributable to other sources. Evidence of routine cleaning, inspection, or upkeep of these weirs is not present in the available documentation.

Monitoring efforts have been sparse. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) maintained a monitoring station on the Sandalwood Canal near Jacksonville Beach, designated as USGS-02246835 [7]. This station collected field measurement data, but only for a limited period between 1989 and 1995, providing a historical baseline but no contemporary data or maintenance logs [7]. Broader oversight is nominally provided by the Jacksonville Waterways Commission, which was established to advise the City Council on the protection and development of all tidal waters in Duval County [8]. While this body has a mandate to conduct research and coordinate programs, its direct involvement or specific actions related to the sedimentation in Hogpen Creek are not documented in the provided source materials.

Sedimentation and Environmental Degradation

The primary environmental concern driving the conflict over Hogpen Creek is extensive and accelerating sedimentation, which residents and some officials link directly to the Sandalwood Canal. This sediment accumulation has tangibly altered the creek's physical characteristics, impaired its ecological function, and diminished its value for residential use.

A substantial body of anecdotal and observational evidence points to the Sandalwood Canal as the principal source of the problem. Former Jacksonville City Councilman Robin Lumb has been a vocal proponent of this view, stating that the canal, which drains a watershed of approximately 11 square miles, discharges "millions of gallons of sediment-laden stormwater directly into Hogpen Creek" during heavy rainfall events [3]. He has characterized the city's denial of responsibility as "patently absurd" given the canal's function as a major conduit for regional stormwater [3]. This perspective is strongly shared by residents who live along the creek.

Homeowners have chronicled a dramatic decline in water depth over recent years. Resident Jake Jacobs, who purchased his home on the creek four years prior to 2026, reported that at low tide, his floating dock now rests in several feet of mud, far from the water's edge [1]. Another 40-year resident, Helen Chestnut, corroborated the observation that the creek's condition is progressively worsening [1]. Residents have described the water depth at low tide being as shallow as six inches in some areas, rendering the waterway impassable for boats and eliminating its recreational function [1, 2].

Beyond the physical buildup of silt, residents have reported associated environmental degradation. They describe an “odor-laden discharge” that emanates from the Sandalwood Canal, suggesting the material being transported is not just inert soil but may contain organic or other materials contributing to poor water quality [1, 2]. Observations also include physical erosion, bank collapse along the creek, and channel scouring, all of which are indicative of altered hydrological patterns and increased sediment load [2]. Some residents have questioned whether other infrastructure projects could be contributing factors, such as the potential for rebar and concrete debris left from JEA’s 2018 Intracoastal Waterway Electrical Improvement Project to be obstructing flow, though JEA has not received direct complaints on the matter [2]. Runoff from broader area development, including work on San Pablo Road, has also been cited by residents as a possible compounding cause [2].

The City of Jacksonville’s administration has presented a starkly different narrative. Officials contend that the current sedimentation is a result of natural processes. Phil Perry, the city’s communications chief, has argued that stormwater runoff from adjacent residential properties carrying soil into the waterway is a likely cause of the siltation observed since the Sandalwood Canal project was completed [2]. This perspective fundamentally disconnects the city’s stormwater infrastructure from the current state of Hogpen Creek, placing the onus on natural erosion and the actions of private property owners. This official stance has been consistently maintained by the Mayor’s administration, which asserts that the engineering of the Sandalwood Canal has not contributed to the increased sedimentation in the creek [2, 3]. This disagreement over the root cause of the sedimentation lies at the heart of the policy and financial dispute.

Ecological and Community Impacts

The progressive sedimentation of Hogpen Creek has triggered a cascade of negative ecological and community impacts, transforming a thriving natural waterway into a source of frustration and concern for residents. The degradation has manifested in a noticeable decline in local wildlife, a loss of recreational access, and a significant threat to property values and the quality of life for homeowners along the creek.

One of the most frequently cited ecological consequences is the impact on local fauna, particularly manatees. Multiple residents have reported that manatees, which were once a common sight in the deeper waters of the creek, no longer frequent the area [1, 2]. The accumulation of silt has made the channel too shallow for these large marine mammals to safely navigate, effectively eliminating a key habitat for a protected species. Residents have described the situation as an “environmental crisis,” highlighting a sense of loss that extends beyond practical concerns [1].

The impact on the community is equally profound. The primary function of a waterfront property—access to the water—has been severely compromised. Homeowners report that their docks, which represent significant personal investments, are unusable for much of the day due to low water levels. Floating docks become stranded in feet of mud at low tide, making it impossible to launch or moor boats [1, 2]. This not only curtails recreational activities like boating and fishing but also undermines a central attribute of the properties themselves.

The financial and social ramifications have been a major catalyst for citizen action. The sedimentation issue came to a head with the formation of the Hogpen Creek Dependent Special District, a mechanism created by the Jacksonville City Council in 2023 to fund a comprehensive dredging project. The plan was to restore the creek to a navigable depth of 5 to 7.5 feet, with an estimated cost of \$4.5 million [3]. This cost was to be levied directly on the 111 property owners within the district through an annual assessment of \$4,500 for a period of 10 to 15 years, with a provision allowing the tax to be raised to as much as \$7,500 per year by a vote [3].

The imposition of this tax provoked immediate and widespread opposition. Many residents, particularly those in communities like Holiday Harbor and Ketch Cove or those on fixed incomes, claimed they were “blindsided” by the assessment [3, 4]. They argued that they had signed an initial petition believing it was merely to explore a solution, not to consent to a multi-decade financial obligation that, for some, exceeded their regular property taxes [3, 4]. Molton Smith, a Holiday Harbor resident, articulated the fear that the steep assessment threatened to price people out of their homes [4]. The controversy was amplified by criticisms that the district was established without the level of public notice and input, such as mailed notifications for hearings, that typically accompany major zoning changes [3]. The ensuing backlash from the community created a volatile political situation, demonstrating the severe social and financial stress caused by the creek’s degradation and the proposed solution.

Citizen, Council, and Administrative Responses

The escalating crisis in Hogpen Creek has prompted a series of fragmented and often conflicting responses from citizens, the Jacksonville City Council, and the mayoral administration. The dispute has transitioned from a localized environmental complaint into a complex political and financial battle over public responsibility and funding priorities.

Citizen Activism and the Dissolution of the Taxing District

The primary response from affected citizens was organized and forceful opposition to the Hogpen Creek Dependent Special District. Perceiving the \$4,500 annual tax as an unfair burden for a problem they believed the city created, residents mounted a campaign that quickly gained political traction. They argued that because the Sandalwood Canal is a public stormwater utility, the city should bear a significant portion, if not all, of the remediation cost. The public outcry placed immense pressure on the city officials who had facilitated the district’s creation.

This citizen backlash proved to be highly effective. City Councilman Rory Diamond, who had initially sponsored the legislation to create the district, became a central figure in its reversal. He later stated that he was on military leave when the bill passed and was unaware his name was on it, a claim that highlights the procedural confusion surrounding the district’s approval [2, 4, 6]. Responding to the intense resident opposition, Councilman Diamond, co-sponsored by Councilman Chris Miller, introduced new legislation to dissolve the special taxing district [5]. In late 2024, the Jacksonville City Council voted unanimously to dismantle the district, removing the contentious assessment from residents’ tax bills and returning the problem to square one [4, 5].

City Council’s Shift Toward a Scientific Solution

With the taxing district dissolved, the focus of the citizen-led effort, now championed by Councilman Diamond, shifted from a purely financial solution to a scientific one. The consensus among residents and their political allies is that any equitable solution must first be based on a definitive understanding of the sediment’s origin. Jake Jacobs, a resident, articulated this sentiment, stating that a formal study would clarify whether the problem is natural or a direct result of public infrastructure, thereby determining who should bear the cost [2].

In response, Councilman Diamond has publicly pledged to secure funding for a comprehensive watershed analysis of Hogpen Creek [2]. His plan is to file a budget amendment in August 2026 to allocate city funds for this study. The estimated cost for such an analysis is approximately \$300,000 [2]. This initiative represents a significant pivot, moving away from placing the financial burden on homeowners and toward using public resources to investigate a problem potentially caused by public infrastructure. However, the success of this plan remains contingent on the city’s budgetary process and the political will of the full City Council.

The Mayoral Administration’s Unwavering Stance

Throughout the controversy, the mayoral administration has maintained a consistent and unyielding position: the City of Jacksonville is not responsible for the sedimentation in Hogpen Creek and will not use public funds for its dredging. Officials have repeatedly pointed to the nearly two-decade-old Sandalwood Canal project’s sediment weirs and attributed the current issues to “natural processes,” such as localized erosion from private properties [2].

This stance directly influences the administration’s response to the proposed watershed study. While Mayor Donna Deegan’s administration has not outright opposed the study, it has made it clear that it will not be included in the mayor’s annual budget proposal. The administration will only execute the study if the City Council independently adds it as a funded line item [2]. This position places the full responsibility for initiating and funding the investigation onto the legislative branch.

Furthermore, even if a study were to implicate city infrastructure, the administration has been non-committal about future actions, stating it is “too early to say” what steps would be taken [2]. Officials have remained steadfast that they do not support using city funds for dredging the creek in the future, reiterating the policy that maintenance of waterways serving private docks is not a public responsibility [5]. This ongoing refusal to accept culpability or financial liability has created a political and administrative impasse, leaving residents and their council representatives to navigate a challenging path toward any potential resolution.

References

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