

Jacksonville Beach Maintaining Services; Honoring Tradition

To the editor:

When you take family and friends to the beach, there is a comfort in knowing that professional lifeguards are there. The City of Jacksonville Beach knows how valued this service is to its residents and visitors. For the past 90 years, the professional staff of the City's Ocean Rescue Division (Ocean Rescue) have provided lifeguarding and ocean rescue services on the beach six days a week, making thousands of rescues. On Sundays and holidays, Ocean Rescue has been supported in performing these essential services by the Volunteer Life Saving Corps (VLSC). Working in partnership with the VLSC for so many years will remain a part of the City's proud history.

Recent events, however, dictate a change in the City's partnership with the VLSC, if the City is to remain a good steward of taxpayer funds. A complaint filed with the United States Department of Labor (DOL), by a former Ocean Rescue employee and VLSC volunteer, resulted in a finding that the City was in violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act minimum wage and overtime laws by permitting Ocean Rescue lifeguards to volunteer as VLSC lifeguards, performing the same services on Sundays and holidays without pay for their volunteer time.

The City agreed to come into compliance with federal laws by paying back wages to Ocean Rescue lifeguards for their volunteer service on Sundays and holidays (approximately \$250,000), and making organizational changes to prevent violations from reoccurring. In January 2022, the City made the organizational change to staff Sundays and holidays with paid Ocean Rescue lifeguards. The DOL ruling required the City to change its ocean rescue policies and procedures to comply with Federal law. The City did not act without reason; more importantly, the City did act with good reasons.

Discussions were held and efforts made to identify ways to maintain some of the VLSC's many positive services, traditions, and activities without risking the City's financial exposure. The City proposed that the VLSC continue programs like the Junior Lifeguard Camp, recognition events honoring Corps members, supporting competition teams, and exploring opportunities to recognize the history and service of the VLSC.

We understand there are concerns for the future of the Lifeguard Station. The Station (built with a combination of public and private funds) is the headquarters for ocean rescue operations, housing critical equipment, with its tower used for visual observations along the beach. Its presence within the City establishes a sense of community identity and pride, while its placement on the National Historic Register (NHR) reaffirms its historical significance. The City desires to maintain the station in its current location, preserve its status on the NHR, and to continue its use for ocean rescue services for generations to come.

Mike Staffopoulos
Jacksonville Beach City Manager