



St. Augustine Commissioner Nancy Sikes-Kline fights to keep her city from turning into history. By Kara Pound. Photos by Walter Coker

Sitting at Georgie's Diner in downtown St. Augustine, City Commissioner Nancy Sikes-Kline is a little frazzled. It's 9:45 on a Saturday morning and she's 15 minutes late for the interview. She apologizes: She got stuck in traffic on the newly rehabilitated Bridge of Lions.

It's an admission tinged with irony, since Sikes-Kline was one of the central figures in the city's fight to save the historic bridge, a decision that many still view as putting preservation ahead of "progress." The just-completed bridge, no larger or more efficient than its 80-year-old predecessor, has split the community between advocates for speed and modernity, and those who feel the Ancient City has no need to apologize for its moniker — or its pace.

For Sikes-Kline, criticisms about the bridge carry less sting now that the renovation is completed. But during the years of contentious debate over whether to save or modernize the span, she took her fair amount of abuse. She says she overcame

it by insulating herself, a strategy that permanently altered some longtime relationships.

This morning, Sikes-Kline asks the waitress for a cup of coffee with Splenda, and rye toast, grits and a side of tomatoes. She also requests a bottle of Datil sauce. At 53, the commissioner is a born-and-bred Floridian with a taste for all things St. Augustine. She's a late-in-life mother and politician, a self-described "workaholic" as an urban land-use planning consultant, a science-fiction nut and a practitioner of Transcendental Meditation. She's also a lifelong advocate for historic preservation. Her first summer internship was with the Tampa Hillsborough Historic Preservation Board, working on a survey of shotgun houses in West Tampa. A subsequent summer internship with the city of St. Augustine's Planning Department later resulted in a job. She moved here in '84, after graduating from the University of Florida with a bachelor's degree in geography, because she felt there was a lot of work to be done in the area.

Soon after arriving, she began working with the local Junior Service League to restore the St. Augustine lighthouse and open it to the public. She spent years fighting to save the bridge, and more recently, she's pushed for tax breaks for historic home renovations.

"Preservation is the key to prosperity for us," she explains. "And when I say prosperity, I don't just mean dollars. I mean rich lives for us and our kids."

Sikes-Kline didn't run for office until 2008, but she thought about it for years. Urged by people with whom she worked and volunteered, she initially wanted to wait until her young children got a little older. She also thought the city needed to "evolve" a bit before electing "someone like me." She needed to evolve, too. "I needed to grow a thick skin." But in 2008, a seat opened where she wouldn't have to challenge an incumbent. Although

saved!



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her mother was terminally ill with the degenerative nerve disease ALS, Sikes-Kline says her mom was a big part of her decision. “She kept encouraging me to take the leap,” she recalls tearfully. Her mother died just as she announced her bid for office, a fact that left her little time to grieve and gave her campaign an unmistakable emotional gravity.

Sikes-Kline ran for City Commission Seat 5 against retired fire chief Jimmy Owens. “That was interesting,” she says. “I’ve known Jimmy for a long time. It was like you could either keep things the way they are with Jimmy or you could choose your future, which is me.”

“It was a relatively clean race — devoid of smear tactics,” says her husband, Roger Kline. “That was a great example for the kids.”

Sikes-Kline won, with a solid 56 percent of the vote, and in so doing became part of one of the most diverse elected boards in Northeast Florida. The current commission is made up of two women (Sikes-Kline and Leanna Freeman), an African-American man (Vice Mayor Errol Jones) and two middle-aged white men (Don Crichlow and Mayor Joe Boles).

“I think it’s good because we have different views, we have different backgrounds and we don’t always agree,” the Commissioner explains. “You don’t have the danger of everyone voting in a block. It serves the public better to have more input and perspective.”

The commission job is considered part-time (though Sikes-Kline says she works seven days a week at it) and pays \$14,000 a year — roughly a dollar for each resident of St. Augustine. She’s largely given up work outside of her elected role, but believes the sacrifice is worth it.

“Our job is to be responsive. If someone e-mails me, that gets my attention. If someone picks up the phone and calls me, that really gets my attention. If someone wants to see me face-to-face, that gets my attention even more. But if someone comes to a commission meeting and puts themselves out — on TV in front of everyone, that’s pretty big — it’s intimidating.”

Not everyone who does so has kind things to say. One particularly vocal member of the public is city critic B.J. Kalaidi, whose ax to grind dates back two years.

In January 2008, before Sikes-Kline was elected, her family went to a public event in the Plaza de la Constitucion where a group called the Ariel Angels was performing acrobatics. The all-female troupe performs around the country, an occasionally bawdy act that relies on audience participation. Kline’s husband responded to a volunteer solicitation and found himself standing in front of the crowd with a bunch of celery stuffed between his legs. One of the Angels whipped the protuberance in half, using a bullwhip.

The bit prompted a few complaints from people who objected to its suggestive nature. That didn’t keep the group from returning a few months later for an encore performance, but even today the incident remains an annoyance for Sikes-Kline. That’s chiefly because of Kalaidi, who believed the incident represented some kind of moral failing on the part of Sikes-Kline. Kalaidi greeted the new commissioner at her first meeting in December 2008 wearing a homemade sign around her neck that read “Eat Celery.” She’s attended virtually every meeting since then, wearing the same sign. Kalaidi remains so angry that she approached a reporter after a recent commission meeting to offer her view of the two-year-old incident. “I question her judgment on some of the things as far as quality of life in this city,” Kalaidi says.

For her part, Sikes-Kline tries to downplay the matter. “Roger didn’t ask to be picked out of the crowd and he didn’t know what was coming,” Sikes-Kline rebuts. “I guess part of the job is working with the public — all kinds of public. I don’t know what to say other than it’s unfortunate that she’s logged on to that one incident.”

Sikes-Kline sits in her living room, cross-legged on an overstuffed armchair, drinking ginger tea. She lives in a modest, 1,500-square-foot home in Davis Shores, a neighborhood just across the Matanzas River from downtown, on the other side of the Bridge of Lions. The neighborhood was built in the late ’20s — around the same time as the bridge — and the



Bridge of Lions advocate Theresa Segal joined Sikes-Kline at the bridge opening ceremony in March.

span is very much a living presence for Sikes-Kline. The living room walls are covered with paintings and photographs of the bridge, done by local artists. And each day crossing into downtown is a little victory celebration. Even when — as is quite common these days — traffic is snarled.

The fact that the bridge was saved remains a source of awe and bewilderment for supporters and opponents, respectively. Initially, city and county officials strongly advocated tearing down the bridge and replacing it with one twice as wide and a foot taller. And both the U.S. Coast Guard and the state Department of Transportation were determined to widen the bascule, or draw span, to allow more room for boats to pass.

Against this wall of bureaucracy and political power came a group called Save Our Bridge, or as they delighted in calling themselves, the SOBs. Sikes-Kline, along with Theresa Segal and Thomas Jefferson Tremmel, formed the core of that group, divvying up duties that ranged from detailed research to old-fashioned arm-twisting.

The group gradually built a base of support, and chipped away at the official line in favor of a replacement. Perhaps the most dramatic turn occurred when the SOBs were able to prove the Coast Guard's data was wrong, forcing the agency to backtrack. But the victory of preservation wasn't a single moment in time; it was a years-long slog, with a surprise ending.

Despite her years of working on high-profile issues, and even her current elected position, Sikes-Kline keeps a low profile. She says she's surprised to have a reporter and photographer sitting in her house. "I've never let anybody do this," she says. "It's a small town and I have a private life. I'm just me and I'd rather talk about issues and projects. If it can help a project, OK — but I'm not the story."

Nancy Rhea Sikes was born in 1956 in West Palm Beach. She grew up in Lakeland in Central Florida, in an old historic house her mom fixed up. Her dad, Leon R. Sikes Jr., worked with his family's ceramic tile manufacturing company, so they moved into a bigger home. "We were just in these big rooms, bumping around," she remembers. Since then, Sikes-Kline prefers living in a small home. "There's a lot of togetherness, a lot of love.

You learn how to be on top of each other."

Her husband, Roger, who works in new construction helping to build energy-efficient, green homes, can't stand living in such a small space, but appreciates their home's sentimental value. Close to 15 years ago, the couple (her second marriage) exchanged vows in front of the cream-painted brick fireplace in the living room. Months later, Sikes-Kline was pregnant with their first son.

"I never thought I would be a mom. I just didn't want to do it. I was too busy," she laughs.

But after becoming a mother, she turned to her own mom for advice. Dr. Sue Middleton, who got her Ph.D. at University of South Florida after divorcing Sikes-Kline's father, is described

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by her daughter as "flamboyant." A pioneering woman whose family spent generations in St. Augustine, Middleton was a psychologist who raced cars, scuba-dived, practiced yoga and was heavily involved in the Junior Service League, an organization for women to promote volunteerism. When Sikes-Kline moved to St. Augustine after college, the group invited her to be a part of the local branch. Sikes-Kline spent six years in the organization.

"You will never be the same after being in the Junior Service League," she says. "It'll change your life." For her, the experience was a real lesson in the politics of preservation. Her first project was to help secure funding for the restoration of the Keeper's House and Lighthouse, get ownership from the United States Coast Guard and open it to the public. She and fellow Leaguer, Barbara Bozard, had to learn to write grants, lobby the legislature and

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raise funds. She recalls attending a reception in Tallahassee when Congressman Bill Chapel approached them. The women began to explain their interest in getting a lease from the Coast Guard for the lighthouse; he was dismissive. “He was doing that ‘little lady’ thing — ‘Y’all so cute, what do you li’l ladies want with that?’ Barbara and I looked at each other. One look and we were like, ‘We’re gonna do it!’”

Friend Theresa Segal, a local artist and the driving force behind Save Our Bridge, says Sikes-Kline never likes being told she can’t do something. The two met in 1996 at a City Commission meeting, and Segal says she instantly admired her as someone knowledgeable and well-connected. But as the two grew closer, Segal says, she was surprised to discover a less serious side. “She was very different from what I thought she would be like,” says Segal. “She has this self-deprecating goofiness.”

She comes by her appreciation for history honestly. Her mom, Sue Middleton, was a strong believer in the city’s archeological endeavors, and when she died about two years ago, she donated her waterfront home in a life estate to the city’s archaeology program.

“I thought it was a pretty cool thing,” says Sikes-Kline. Her stepdad still lives in what’s now dubbed the Middleton House, but after he’s gone, the house will become the city’s. “Whatever they decide to do with it, the money or the house will go to house the archaeology collections of the city,” she observes.

Middleton left her daughter a property, too — an old cigar factory cottage down on historic Marine Street. It’s no bigger than her current home, but for Sikes-Kline, it’s just the right size. “I have a dream,” she says, “to live there when the kids grow up, and it’s just the two of us.”

iving smaller and slower isn’t a prerequisite for living in St. Augustine, but it helps. Surrounded by an ever-expanding ring of subdivisions and chain stores,

the city is experiencing a variety of pressures to adapt, whether through faster traffic patterns, wider roads or bigger bridges. For Sikes-Kline, the biggest hurdle at the moment is convincing the city government and its people to live in concert with their city, rather than slowly destroy it.

“The basic assumption is that we should all be able to drive our cars anywhere we want and then we should have a parking spot waiting for us wherever we want to put it,” she explains. “We’ve got a parking spot in our driveway waiting for us. One in our workplace waiting for us, we’ve got one at the grocery store waiting for us and, of course, we’ve got all of this road in between.”

Sikes-Kline’s focus is making St. Augustine a more walkable, bike-friendly place, and improving public transportation. She’s currently the city’s representative on the board of the North Florida Transportation Planning Organization and is fighting passionately to get an Amtrak stop in the downtown area. “I’d like to see cars take a backseat for our little European city that wasn’t built for cars.”

It’s not a new battle. At one time, St. Augustine officials wanted to tear down the Old Gates to the city because they weren’t wide enough to accommodate motorcars. They once planned to turn the Fort’s large lawn into a parking lot. They once wanted to build a massive parking garage behind the Lightner Museum, in the middle of the historic district. And they once planned to replace the iconic bridge with a four-lane-wide span.

It’s an ongoing struggle, one that Sikes-Kline, whose two-year commission term ends in December, intends to continue. She doesn’t yet know who she’ll draw as a challenger, but says she will definitely run again.

“I’ll do it as long as [the citizens] want me to do it, but I think I do a good job. I work hard. I fulfill my promises. I respond to people. I stay accessible,” she says. “And I try to keep the long view, which is what’s needed in this job.” □



The victory of preserving the bridge wasn’t a single moment in time; it was a years-long slog, with a surprise ending.