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Danielle Von Dreele

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Seagrass beds, Tampa Bay water quality and St. Pete Referendum No. 1

BY DANIELLE VON DREELE

NNB Reporter

St. Petersburg residents are reasonably concerned with the city's questionable water supply. The history of Tampa Bay's warm, shallow waters is murky with pollution from dredging, industrial emissions and wastewater. A question up for vote on the city election Nov. 3 is addressing the issue with increased protections to seagrass beds.

Referendum question No.1 asks residents to decide if the City Council should be allowed to establish permanent development restrictions over city-owned, aquatically-located lands near North Shore Park. The restrictions would prevent any development or

construction projects near or on the area's seagrass beds. These protections are intended to support and enhance seagrass beds that can be used to improve the city's water quality and surrounding ecology.

Tess Chibirka, a volunteer at the Suncoast chapter of the Florida Sierra Club, said that poor water quality is a result of overdevelopment.

"That's great that our city is growing, but we don't have enough infrastructure to handle it," said Chibirka.

Currently, any decisions regarding the placement of protections on seagrass beds must be approved through a referendum. Christian Haas, a member of the Old Southeast Neighborhood Association, said if the referendum passes, the City Council will no longer have to wait annually for each election to add future protections for seagrass beds.

"Every time they (City Council) want to change (add protections), they have to go through referendum," said Haas. "This is a permanent reservation, so changes can happen without a city-wide referendum."

Researchers are noticing a correlation between seagrass bed populations and water quality. Carlos Frey, a Senior engineer for the City of St. Petersburg, says seagrass beds and water quality benefit from each other in different ways.

"One of the things that we use as a measure of our success is the amount of seagrass out (in Tampa Bay)," said Frey.

According to Haas, seagrass beds filter out toxins in the water and aid in erosion and filtration. The Bay's water clarity also allows for sunlight to reach seagrass beds rooted deep below the surface.

"Seagrass needs light," said Nanette Holland O'Hara, the Public Outreach Coordinator for the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. "If it doesn't get light, it can't grow."

Groups like the Tampa Bay Estuary Program and The Nitrogen Management Consortium are already working to increase the number of seagrass beds in the Bay. According to O'Hara, the

amount of seagrass beds grew from 20,000 acres in 1990 to 40,295 acres this year. The number exceeds the 38,000 acres of seagrass that existed in the 1950s.

If the referendum passes, the city will hold public hearings before making any decisions regarding land restrictions over seagrass beds in North Shore Park. Though the referendum only applies to seagrass beds between the Coffee Pot Bayou Canal and the Pier, the initiative affects the city's overall water supply.

"It doesn't help a specific district, it helps all of St. Petersburg," said Haas.

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