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

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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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