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PUBLISHER & EDITOR
ADAM J. MCLEAN

Copy Editor

Phyllis Johnson

Layout & Graphics

Kristina Edstrom

Cover Illustration

Kristina Edstrom

Writers

Natasha Collazo
Carlos Moncada

Distributors

Teresa Young
Don Goodman
Mark Assad
Susan Hyatt
Sean Phillips
Tom DeBello

Letters to the Editor
please email
info@jofimedia

Advertising please call
(727) 444-0890
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LARGO SEEKS TO BORROW UP TO \$26 MILLION FOR INJECTION WELLS

PROJECT AIMS TO IMPROVE WATER QUALITY IN TAMPA BAY

BY: Carlos Moncada

LARGO—President Trump's energy slogan "Drill, baby, drill" is taking on new meaning here, as city leaders proceed with plans to dispose of treated wastewater deep underground.

But their municipal counterparts facing the same state mandate apparently are taking a different approach: "Wait, baby, wait."



City officials expect the deep-well injection project to be completed in 2029. Graphic from City of Largo.

The city commission on Aug. 19 approved on first reading an ordinance authorizing the city to borrow up to \$26 million from the state. The funds would finance construction of two deep injection wells that would send excess wastewater, or effluent, 1,200 feet below the surface.

Unlike many other local governments, Largo is taking a proactive approach toward complying with a 2021 state law that requires cities and counties to eliminate all "nonbeneficial" surface water discharges by 2032.

Largo discharges treated wastewater that isn't used for spray irrigation — about 6 million gallons a day — into Feather Sound on Old



Largo's wastewater treatment plant. Photo Courtesy of The City of Largo.

Tampa Bay from its wastewater treatment plant on the eastern edge of the city.

"Because we're getting out in front of this, a lot of other utilities are not," Mayor Woody Brown said. "They're kind of waiting to see if Tallahassee is serious on this."

The commission is proceeding with the project in spite of concerns and questions among Brown and others about its cost or whether it's even the best option for the city.

A public hearing and final vote are scheduled for Sept. 16.

"Whew. Seems a bit pricey," Vice Mayor Curtis Holmes said when told that two deep injection wells and two monitoring wells would cost around \$8 million. "That's the best deal we could get."

Although the proposed ordinance sets a maximum loan amount of \$26 million, the city may end up borrowing less.

Current estimates are that the project, which would start next year and be completed in 2029, will run around \$20



Rebecca Spuhler, Largo Finance Director

ter nutrients — primarily nitrogen and phosphorus — that fuel coastal red tide outbreaks and harmful algae blooms, killing off seagrass beds and marine life.

"The point of this is to eliminate treated wastewater going into Tampa Bay," he said. "And it's important to me and I think this commission to do what we can to reduce nutrients going into Tampa Bay.

"The whole Tampa Bay estuary has done really well until about the last five years. Now the seagrass numbers have been going down, especially in Old Tampa Bay, which is where we put our treated wastewater. So I get it. This is something that's good for the region."

Brown added that he sees the project as a temporary solution until — and if — the city or the region come up with a better wastewater disposal option.

"If it's temporary for 15 years or 20 years, then [the project] makes sense," he said. "If it's temporary for three or four, it may not."

Jerald Woloszynski, Largo's engineering services director, told commissioners the project is "an interim step" toward the eventual goal of the city selling its excess effluent to Tampa Bay Water as a future source of drinking water by 2035.

If that happens, he later told Pinellas Press, the city would still need the injection wells to service the new potable water plant.

The ordinance was approved on a 6-1 vote, with Commissioner Michael Smith voting "no."



The Largo City Commission gave initial approval

million. That includes about \$12 million for surface piping, although that figure could change.

The loan's 2.72 percent interest rate would amount to an additional \$5.2 million that the city would have to pay into the state's revolving loan program, administered by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, said Rebecca Spuhler, the city's finance director.

If the full \$26 million is used, the interest would total \$6.75 million over the 20-year life of the loan, she said.

"It's basically costing us an additional \$6 million to build this project," Commissioner Mike DiBrizzi said. "We didn't ask for it. It's disturbing to hear."

The mayor reminded his colleagues of the big picture: to curtail wastewa-