

LARGO MOVES CLOSER TO DEEP WELL INJECTION

SOME COMMISSIONERS VOICE CONCERNS ABOUT THE DISPOSAL METHOD

/BY: **Carlos Moncada**

LARGO—City officials are moving closer to making treated sewage disappear by pumping it deep beneath our feet.

The Largo City Commission on June 3 approved a resolution in support of a \$28.68-million plan to build deep injection wells that would send about 6 million gallons a day of treated wastewater underground, rather than discharging it into Old Tampa Bay.

The plan is in response to a 2021 state law, known as Senate Bill 64, that requires local governments to come up with ways to halt the dumping of treated wastewater, or effluent, into surface waters by 2032.

But some commissions voiced concerns about the environmental soundness of deep well injection — long considered a popular but controversial disposal method — as well as its spiraling price tag.

“I still have a lot of reservations on this,” Commissioner Michael Smith said. “I have some real hesitations with this plan.”

Smith also noted the project’s cost has jumped by more than \$8 million in

just a few years, and fears it will continue to climb by the time the project is completed next year.

Mayor Woody Brown said of the various options the city considered for its excess effluent, deep-well injection appeared “the only really one that makes sense,” at least for now.

“I don’t know how good of an idea that is for a long-term solution,” the mayor said.

Deep well injection has been around for decades. Communities such as St. Petersburg as well as those in south Florida have sent billions of gallons of wastewater into limestone caverns deep below the state’s main supplies of drinking water.

But in some areas, including Pinellas County, some of that waste that was supposed to have remained confined by layers of limestone have migrated upward over the years.

Pinellas permanently sealed its deep injection wells in 2003, when it switched to surface water discharge of its unused effluent, said Nadege Pierre, communications manager for Pinellas County Utilities.

But now the county faces spending untold millions to drill two new injection



Jerald Woloszynski, Largo’s engineering services director, at the June 3 city commission meeting. Photo from City of Largo.

wells in south county to comply with the requirements of Senate Bill 64.

“If preserved, those wells might have helped us meet current Senate Bill 64 requirements at a lower cost,” Pierre told the Pinellas Press.

Largo’s wastewater treatment plant, on the eastern edge of the city, discharges treated effluent into Feather Sound on Old Tampa Bay, the northwest portion of Tampa Bay. Since 2012, the plant has been under orders from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to reduce the levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in its discharges.

The city’s plan calls for drilling two 1,200-foot deep injection wells, two monitoring stations and laying about 1,800 feet of new piping. The city hopes to award contracts for the work in October. It has applied for a low-interest state loan to finance the construction.

Jerald Woloszynski, Largo’s engineering services director, said

the city was unsuccessful in securing a \$12.25 million state water quality improvement grant toward the project, although it did receive a \$455,000 grant from the Tampa Bay Estuary Program because of the potential to vastly reduce nitrogen levels in Old Tampa Bay — as much as 19 tons per year.

That, in turn, could help restore lost seagrass beds as well as help prevent red tide outbreaks, Woloszynski said.

He said the city’s effluent, also known as reclaimed water, is treated to a high standard that makes it safe to use for irrigation, although currently there is not enough city demand to use the resource solely for that purpose. Woloszynski said the treated effluent appears “crystal clear” and in some instances is of better quality than the brackish groundwater aquifers from which most communities draw their drinking water.

“It looks just like the water coming out of your tap,” Woloszynski said. “There’s no smell to it. There’s no sediment in it.”

By 2035, Largo might even be selling that treated wastewater to Tampa Bay Water, the region’s main water supplier, “to use for a higher and better purpose,” Woloszynski said.

In other words, the water you flush today could become the water you drink tomorrow.

