

COVER
STORY

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DOWNTOWN LARGO'S NEW
CENTERPIECE FINALLY ARRIVESHORIZON WEST BAY BRINGS CITY HALL, RETAIL AND
PUBLIC SPACES TOGETHER

MAYOR WOODY BROWN TOLD PINELLAS PRESS THAT HE BELIEVES THE COMPLETED PROJECT HAS ALREADY CHANGED PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CITY HALL AND DOWNTOWN LARGO.

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-MAYOR WOODY BROWN**

LARGO—After years of delays, cost overruns and occasional teeth-gnashing by city leaders, Largo finally has opened the doors to its long-awaited new city hall at Horizon West Bay.

Public services began operating from the 5-story complex at 440 West Bay Dr. on May 19, marking the completion of perhaps Largo's most ambitious and controversial redevelopment project in decades.

Horizon West Bay is being touted by city officials as both a new home for municipal operations and a catalyst for transforming downtown Largo into a more vibrant, walkable destination.

The 87,000-square-foot mixed-use development combines city offices, retail space, public gathering areas and a parking garage in what officials hope will become the centerpiece of a reimagined downtown corridor.

The project includes a 150-person "Community Corner" event space, free public parking and more than 3,000 square feet of mural artwork created by the Vitale Bros. Planned commercial tenants include Louis Pappas Fresh Greek, Parlor Doughnuts, Strachan's Ice Cream and The Tox, with additional retail and restaurant space still available for lease.

City leaders have repeatedly described Horizon West Bay as a cornerstone of broader redevelopment plans aimed at reshaping Largo's downtown core.

Last year, commissioners advanced plans for a downtown entertainment district along West Bay Drive that would allow "sip and stroll" open-container drinking in designated public areas.

Encouraging more nightlife and pedestrian activity, they said, would help transform downtown into a more active destination for residents and visitors.

Mayor Woody Brown told Pinellas Press that he believes the completed project has already changed public perceptions of city hall and downtown Largo.

"We are now planning a ribbon cutting for a modern mixed-use, purpose-built facility that has changed the way people think about city hall," Brown said.

The mayor also said one of the things he is most proud of is the building's accessibility and openness to the public.

"The lobby is open and comfortable to visit, whether you are there to do city business, just look at artwork or because all the seats in Parlor Doughnuts are full," he said. "More people will connect to city hall. Heck, a lot more people will actually know where city hall is."

The new city hall is designed to be much easier to find and navigate than the old government building at 201 Highland Ave. N., which the city plans to redevelop.

Last year, commissioners approved a contract with Dallas-based commercial real estate firm CBRE Group to market and help redevelop the 14-acre municipal complex once city operations relocated downtown.

The site also houses the police department and emergency operations center. Voters approved the property's sale in a 2024 referendum.

Brown said proposals from developers for the Highland Avenue property were submitted May 15 and that the city received multiple responses.

"Any plan or proposal will have to comply with the ballot language that our residents passed in 2024," the mayor said.

Pressure to move into the new complex intensified last month after a sewer line backup flooded much of the first floor of the Highland Avenue building, forcing its closure and the relocation of meetings and public services.

Brown said the sewer incident accelerated the departure of some employees from the old building, although not the overall timeline for opening Horizon West Bay.

The move into the glass, metal and concrete building closes a contentious last few months for the city.

In March, commissioners accused contractor Biltmore Construction Co. of "extortion," "blackmail" and holding the city "over a barrel" during a heated debate over a \$500,000 change order needed to complete the building after failed final inspections.

Originally budgeted at \$69.6 million when construction began in 2022, the project's "guaranteed maximum price" climbed to

The new Largo City Hall at Horizon West Bay officially opened for business on May 19 in downtown. Photo by Carlos Moncada.



nearly \$80 million through 10 builder-submitted change orders, not including roughly \$36 million in long-term financing costs.

The city was still tallying final project costs as of last week, said Jerald Woloszynski, Largo's engineering services director.

Brown attributed much of the overruns and delays to the impact of Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024.

"Prior to October 2024 construction was ahead of schedule," he said. "The demand on labor and supplies following Helene and Milton resulted in delays and cost increases that we could not have predicted."

Brown acknowledged there were also design challenges during construction, including a planned HVAC system tied to the city's reclaimed water infrastructure that ultimately had to be redesigned.

Still, the mayor defended the overall project and timeline. The building opened roughly a year and a half later than originally scheduled.

"In just seven years, we went through commission approval, concept development, public input, design, site selection, land acquisition, permitting and construction, not to mention a global pandemic and two major hurricanes," Brown said.

The ceremonial ribbon-cutting for Horizon

West Bay is scheduled for June 2 at 5 p.m. Residents will be able to tour portions of the facility beginning at 4 p.m., with additional public tours and a larger grand opening celebration planned later this fall.

Yet even as the city celebrates the building's completion, disputes tied to the project continue.

On the same day Horizon West Bay officially opened, the city commission marked its first meeting in the new chambers by voting to hire a South Florida law firm for anticipated construction-related legal matters connected to the project.

City Manager John Curp said that Biltmore Construction recently submitted a letter seeking an additional \$690,142.45 in compensation related to alleged delays caused by design changes.

City officials dispute responsibility for those delays, and Curp said in a report to commissioners that the builder's request represents an "escalated effort to shift accountability for past and ongoing construction-related delay issues."

The proposed legal contract could cost the city between \$40,000 and \$150,000 through possible mediation proceedings, according to the agenda report.