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NOVEMBER 2022

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Welcome back home winter residents

By STEVE LEE
News Reporter

The Zephyrhills News gives a hearty welcome back to our winter visitors returning at this time of year from various places up north, Canada and elsewhere.

We publish this special section annually to update you up on news, events and various changes within the city and surrounding areas that you might have missed while you were away.

At long last the national, state and local scenes moved past the affects of the coronavirus pandemic with 2022 somewhat marking a return to normalcy. Business, on every level, picked up and people got out to do more and became much more active than in recent years.

Here are some of the top stories we ran in The Zephyrhills News while many of you were gone:

April, May and June revealed significant progress in growth and development projects throughout the area.

Sure to affect commuters in and around Zephyrhills were road projects along and around State Road 56. Expansion work is under way along SR 56, which includes the I-75 interchange in Wesley Chapel. Take notice of detours that continue to change as roadwork is ongoing.

As has been the case in recent years, businesses and residential developers continue to select Zephyrhills for their expansion plans. Count a chiropractors' office, gymnastics facility and another Dollar General among them.

During the summer, Zephyrhills received more than \$12 million for three infrastructure-related projects. Those appropriations, part of the state budget, were for new water and sewer lines, a new terminal and improvements at the Zephyrhills Municipal Airport and an entrance road for a new National Guard

facility on a parcel on the south side of town.

Additionally, plans got under way for The Backyard, a gathering place in the back yard of city hall and Main Street. Plus, a new concept for a public park was revealed for Hercules Park, once home to the city's swimming pool.

Downtown events have returned with the Veterans and Christmas parades, as well as a Halloween festival.

Speaking of festivals, Pioneer Florida Museum got back to a regular schedule of events and activities. Horse pulls, a fall festival and Night at the Museum were among the numerous activities at the Dade City venue.

The Zephyrhills Chamber of Commerce celebrated its annual tribute to local ambassadors and businesses with a Superhero theme for the chamber banquet. That marked the first event under the direction of new president Vicki Wiggins, a replacement for Melonie Monson who served six years in that role.

A real hero, Oak Creek resident and Plant City Police Officer Michal Pietruskino helped rescue an autistic boy from a burning home.

The city lost one of its favorites when Nelson Ryman passed away in November. Beloved "Poppi" was remembered as a pillar of the community, devoted to his family and helping others.

The Zephyrhills News extended its longstanding place in the community by celebrating its 111th anniversary. Publisher/editor Jan Linville continues to focus on the best local news coverage with reporters Steve Lee and Andy Warren bringing you that information.

Sales manager Theresa LeBlanc helps advertisers promote their businesses and products. Nancy King is the graphic artist, Josephine Light is our receptionist, Cindy DeMatteo is the accounting manager and James Bannon oversees circulation.

Residential and commercial developments are ongoing

Zephyrhills and the outlying area continue its recent growth spurt as projects remain under way

By Steve Lee
April 7, 2022

Countless parts of Florida, ranging from municipalities to the rural fringes, have witnessed growth spurts in recent years. Count Zephyrhills and the outlying areas among those with residential and commercial developments that have the state booming in population growth.

Indeed, Florida surpassed New York in 2020 and with 21.5 million people now ranks as the third most-populated state in the nation. Only California and Texas have more people than those who live in the Sunshine State.

Zephyrhills lists 17,194, according to the 2020 census. By comparison, neighboring Wesley Chapel, a boom town for the past 20 years, lists a population of 64,866. Just north, Dade City has 7,375 residents and has not experienced growth anything like Zephyrhills and Wesley Chapel.

City planner Todd Vande Berg and his department have been extremely busy of late with no signs of the area's growth spurt slowing down any time soon.

"We'll probably never catch up with Wesley Chapel because that's such a large area," he said of the unincorporated part of central Pasco extending from Zephyrhills to Land O' Lakes highlighted by thoroughfares of Interstate 75 as well as State Roads 54 and 56. "Percentage-wise, we're growing. We're becoming more diverse."

Among the top three residential developments are the Hidden River tract with 220 homes, the 550 homes being built in Zephyr Lakes and Abbott Square, with 560 homes, the latter being a combination of single-family, townhomes and villas.

Vande Berg can appreciate the variety available in Abbott Square.

"We're looking for that," he said, noting that some developments with single-family homes as the only option rules out a certain percentage of people desiring other options. "It kind of leaves out the middle people who can't afford (new single-family homes in the \$300,000-\$500,000 range)."

Two other neighboring communities are nearly built out with The Oaks and Links of Calusa totaling nearly 200 homes and bordering the Silverado Golf Course. Just across Simmons Road, dormitories are going up as part of an expansion of the Sarah Vande Berg Tennis and Wellness Center.

While city and county planners did not deal much with affordable housing in Zephyrhills in the past it is coming to the forefront more of late.

As for housing, Vande Berg noted that "most of those projects are coming to fruition."

Other projects recently opened or about to open later this spring are in the commercial sector. There is a new Ace Hardware next to the Big Lots in a shopping plaza off Allen Road. Near the intersection of Eiland and Gall boulevards, a veterans clinic and marijuana dispensary are about to open.

North on Gall Boulevard near the Walmart, work is ongoing for a large Radiant car wash and inside the Walmart there is a change for fast food. Charleys Philly Steaks have replaced McDonald's at some Walmarts, as is the case for the one in Zephyrhills.

"We are excited about this opportunity to partner with Walmart and to bring smiles to our guests with an updated and whimsical environment," said Brian Hipsher, chief marketing officer for Charleys.

Just north of the Walmart, The Hungry Creek will open soon. It is sandwiched between Game Stop and Capri Pizza & More.

Lastly, on the south side of the city, a Dollar General is under construction at the corner of Gall Boulevard and C Avenue.

While there are plenty of project still under way, not to mention the industrial corridor out by the Zephyrhills Municipal Airport, that remains in the planning stages, Zephyrhills is filling up.

"The amount of undeveloped land in the city has decreased in the last decade," Vande Berg said.

Ace Hardware, in a plaza next to Big Lots, is among several new businesses opening in Zephyrhills.



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Update on road projects in Zephyrhills and East Pasco County

Three significant road projects affect commuters in and around Zephyrhills

By Andy Warrener
April 28, 2022

The first project hits closest to home and is also the one that's in its earliest phase. That is the widening project on County Road 54, running east-west and sitting north of Zephyrhills High School. The project is a joint undertaking between the City of Zephyrhills and Pasco County. The costs for the project are split but the construction will be done by the county.

The scope of the project entails a number of intersection and shoulder improvements from the Wawa at Gall Boulevard and CR54, going east all the way to 23rd Street. The intersection at Wire Road/12th Street and CR54 will have traffic signal mast arms to replace the cables there currently. Wire Road/12th Street will also get designated right and left turn lanes. Further down CR54, 23rd Street will get a traffic signal light on mast arms. The south side of 23rd Street will get a designated left turn lane.

There are a number of safety measures and accommodations for pedestrians, too. A 10-foot multi-use path on the south side of CR54 will run from Dairy Road, all the way to 23rd Street. On the north side, a five-foot sidewalk will connect to existing paths at Dairy Road and terminate at 23rd Street.

"It's a safety project," Technical Specialist III and Project Manager Patricia Arndt said. "Additional pedestrian signals at the intersection, which we don't have right now, will improve public safety."

Right now, the arduous task of relocating the utilities is being completed. The project requires coordinating with Duke Energy in relocating power poles. Frontier Communications also has a lot of fiber-optic cable under the ground on the shoulders of the road.

"This is critical infrastructure that we're still relocating," Arndt said. "We've been relocating it since September. Most people can't see all that work that we're doing. It's been a lot of hard work along that whole corridor."

Nevertheless, the light at the end of that tunnel is lit. Arndt says that the county expects to issue a Notice to Proceed by July 1. This is somewhat fortuitous because the high school will be out of session by that time.

The next project is the widening of State Road 54 between Curley Road and Eiland Boulevard. This project is widening the existing two-lane road to a four-lane highway with medians. A sidewalk will be built on the north side of the road and a 10-foot wide multi-use trail will be built on the south side. The sidewalk and trail will run the entire length of the project. The \$4.5 million, \$42.5 million project began way back in 2017 but was one of the projects that suffered from the D.A.B. default. Cone & Graham, Inc. have taken over the project.

It consists of widening the existing two-lane road to a four-lane highway with medians. A sidewalk will be built on the north side of the road and a 10-foot wide multi-use trail will be built on the south side. The sidewalk and trail will run the entire length of the project, from east of Curley Road to east of the Morris Bridge Road/Eiland Boulevard intersection.

Watch out for closures south of SR 54 on Morris Bridge Road this week. The next major public impact will be to close the south side of this intersection (Morris Bridge Road) to reconstruct the connection to SR54. The just-scheduled plan is to close the Morris Bridge Road connection to SR54 for five days, weather permitting.

The last of the three is the I-75/SR56 Diverging Diamond Interchange (DDI). This was another of the defaulted D.A.B. projects that is back underway. This project will reconfigure the I-75/SR56 interchange between CR54 and Cypress Ridge Boulevard in Pasco County. The existing diamond interchange will be modified and converted to a diverging diamond interchange (DDI). The main change will be to diverge (cross) SR56 traffic to the left side of the road through the interchange, and then cross vehicles



Above: Detour map during closures of the State Road 56 and I-75 interchange.



Left: An aerial view of the State Road 54 widening, looking west from the State Road 54 and Eiland Boulevard intersection.

back over to the right side of the road on the opposite side of the interchange. The idea is to take left-hand turns out of the intersection in order to move traffic through the area faster. It is a \$33.6 million project being undertaken by Superior Construction Company Southeast, L.L.C. The project began back in January of 2019 and is finally moving at a fast clip.

The transition of the interchange to the Diverging Diamond Interchange (DDI) is now scheduled to happen on April 30 to May 1. SR56 will be closed at I-75 from 11 p.m. Saturday, April 30 to approximately 10 a.m. or later on Sunday, May 1. A previously-scheduled attempt was rained out, so all of these details are weather-permitting. Just two interchange ramps will be open during the closure, the eastbound SR56 ramp onto southbound I-75 and the northbound I-275/ I-75 exit ramp onto eastbound SR 56.

Eastbound SR56 traffic will be detoured to the northeast on Wesley Chapel Boulevard (CR54) to SR581 (Bruce B. Downs Boulevard), then south on SR581 (Bruce B. Downs Boulevard) back to SR 56. Additionally, the right turn lanes on the south side of SR56 at Grand Cypress Boulevard onto eastbound SR56 will be closed and the left turn lanes at Grand Cypress Boulevard on the north side of SR56 will be closed to prevent travel onto eastbound SR56. The eastbound SR56 ramp onto southbound I-75 will be open; any traffic traveling on eastbound SR56 past Grand Cypress Boulevard will be forced to enter southbound I-75.

For westbound traffic during the closure, SR56 traffic wanting to cross I-75 will be directed north on SR581 (Bruce B. Downs Boulevard) to SR54, then southwest on CR54 (Wesley Chapel Boulevard) to SR56. Any westbound SR56 traffic between SR581 (Bruce B. Downs Boulevard) and Cypress Ridge Boulevard will be directed to U-Turn at Cypress Ridge Boulevard to head back east on SR56 to SR581 (Bruce B. Downs Boulevard). This is one detour drivers will definitely want to avoid.

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Businesses continue to target Zephyrhills and its growing community

Residential projects are ongoing in east Pasco with several commercial developments already open or under way

By Steve Lee
May 5, 2022

Aside from ongoing residential development in the single-family and multi-family categories, there continues to be an influx of commercial development in Zephyrhills. Those businesses are in the medical, retail, restaurant and sports fields in an area of east Pasco that is constantly expanding of late.

Chiropractors recently expanded to the area from Wesley Chapel, a gymnastics facility opened near the Zephyrhills Municipal Airport and a new Dollar General is going up along Gall Boulevard, not far from another store of its kind just up the road.

Drs. Sean Padgett and Rachel Settles, who already operated Innate Chiropractic & Wellness in Wesley Chapel, took over a facility on 5th Avenue, across the street from the Alice Hall Building at Zephyr Park. Familiarity contributed to that expansion with Padgett, Settles and Dr. Jennifer McDuffie being former classmates at Palmer College of Chiropractic in Daytona Beach.

"(McDuffie) asked if we would like to step in at her practice," said Padgett, noting that McDuffie left due to being pregnant with her fifth child. "We've had our eyes on serving smaller towns in the Tampa area."

Padgett noted that, with him being from a small town in northwest Florida, he relished being in a place like Zephyrhills. He likes the community and identity of the city and its surroundings.

Elsewhere, JAMM Gymnastics has opened off Airport Road. It offers tot, pre-school and recreational gymnastics classes. Additionally, there is a nine-week summer camp program, as well as birthday parties and other arrangements.

The grand opening, complete with a ribbon-cutting that included members of the Greater Zephyrhills Chamber of Commerce, took place April 30.

"We are thrilled to have this new business here in Zephyrhills," said Melonie Monson, the chamber's president. "It is a game-changer for our families who are looking for activities for their children right here in our backyard. We are looking forward to watching them grow and build partnerships with our schools to bring the much-needed extracurricular activity to our youth."

JAMM Gymnastics actually is the second gymnastics facility in Zephyrhills. East Pasco Gymnastics, which also offers cheerleading, recently placed young athletes in state competitions.

Additionally, at the northwest corner of U.S. 301 and Pretty Pond Road site approval has been given for retail and restaurant usage. Vande Berg said in addition to a car wash at that location, plans call for a Tijuana Flats and a Dunkin' Donuts.

As has been the case in recent years, residential development is flourishing in Zephyrhills. The most recent projects are Tyson Townhomes with about 100 units, according to city planner Todd Vande Berg, going up across from the city's police station off 8th Street.

The other residential development is for 200 apartments that are being planned for Fort King Road, just north of Eiland Boulevard. Vande Berg, who has worked for the city since 1996, and said there have been no new apartments during that span, mentioning that there also will be apartments in the Zephyr Commons area.

"We were probably lacking in some multi-family (options)," Vande Berg said. "The market for multi-family and apartments and townhomes is pretty hot. It is now in Zephyrhills too."

Meanwhile, work is ongoing at several construction projects off Simonds Road. In addition to single-family and multi-family developments on both sides of that road as well as off Eiland Boulevard to the east, a building for dormitories is being built adjacent to the Sarah Vande Berg Tennis & Wellness Center.



Above: Zephyrhills Chamber of Commerce arranged for a ribbon-cutting ceremony at JAMM Gymnastics.



Left: Innate Chiropractic & Wellness is located on 5th Avenue across from the Alice Hall building.

Below: The new Dollar Tree located on Gall Boulevard just up from another store of its kind.



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State Appropriations greenlight municipal projects in Zephyrhills

Governor Ron DeSantis' pen approves a trio of appropriations coming to Zephyrhills

By Andy Warrener
June 23, 2022

The City of Zephyrhills is receiving \$12.04 million in state appropriations for three infrastructure-related projects, as part of the 2022-23 Florida state budget. Governor DeSantis signed the budget into law on June 2 and the city stands to benefit.

"We try to foster relationships with our local legislators and not just when we're in Tallahassee, asking for things," Zephyrhills City Manager William Poe Jr. said. "Fortunate is an understatement. They see what we are trying to do in Zephyrhills and

they want to help us."

The first appropriation, in the tune of \$6.6 million, is slated for the Zephyrhills Municipal Airport. Projects at the airport are ongoing. Phase I started as part of a \$5.9 million, 2018-19 state appropriation that did three things: one - it extended Runway 119, two - it extended the taxiway connected to Runway 119, and three - it built an access road on the south side of the airport, off Alston Avenue.

The second project or Phase II was a \$3.2 million, 2021-22 state appropriation for "interent parking" or jet parking in the northern portion of the airport, just south of the terminal. The airport is turning a grassy area into a concrete or asphalt paved area where jets can park. With that project, the design is complete and it is ready to go out to bid. Poe expects the project to be completed in the next 12 months.

The 2022-23 state appropriation that just passed is designed to: re-build the FBO or terminal, extend Taxiway F and build two box hangars. The Fixed Base Operation or FBO is fancy airport lingo for the "terminal." Currently, it's just offices for staff with minor amenities. The project would create an 8,000-square-foot terminal, either a stand-alone structure or an addition to the current structure.

"The original plan was to build an entirely separate building but with the economy the way it is with cost of materials, labor and lead times, we are looking at the possibility of adding to the existing building," Poe said. "It's fluid how exactly we're going to build the FBO but with the appropriation, we can actually start planning now."

Taxiway F will extend roughly 1,700 feet and connect to the access road built during the Phase I project. The two box hangars will be built to accommodate 16-20 person corporate jets. The city and airport hope to attract more of that type of traffic. Poe mentioned well-known football coaches and politicians that have used the airport in the past and recently. The city wants to attract more of that type of GA or General Aviation.

"Our goal is to be the best GA airport in the area," Poe said. The second state appropriation provided \$3.5 million to the city for a water and sewer main line extension. This money piggybacks on an earlier phase of the project. Phase I was funded by the federal Build Back Better bill passed in the 2022 legislative session. The \$1.5 million will enable running a sewer main along Otis Allen Road, starting at Wire Road and extending east. Construction has not yet begun. The city is in the design phase right now and will put the project out to bid once the designs complete. The new state appropriation allows the city to embark on Phase II.

Phase II will run a water line for approximately 4,000 square feet from Green Slope Drive (behind the Walmart), west toward Fort King Road. The plan is to tie the new line into an existing one in order to create a "loop" system. A "loop" system allows utilities to provide service to area residents, even when there is a main break somewhere. It equates to fewer customers having an interruption in their service. Several fire hydrants will be added along the water main line. The sewer line will run along Kossick Road from U.S. Highway 301 to Fort King Road - east to west - and from Phelps Road to Simons Road - north to south. The sewer line could take as many as 400 existing septic tanks out of use, connecting them to the municipal line.

The last appropriation provides \$1.9 million for an entrance road connecting the new National Guard facility. The Florida



The area west of Zephyr Commons where the new water and sewer lines will be built.

National Guard recently received a \$25 million state appropriation to purchase land and build a training center. They have selected a parcel north of 6th Avenue and South Avenue on the south side of town, north of the airport. The city will use their \$1.9 million to acquire right-of-way land to build the access road, construct the road itself, and install or extend existing water and sewer lines to the subject property.



The current Fixed Base Operation or FBO at Zephyrhills Municipal Airport and where the new terminal will be built.

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Pioneer Florida Museum hosts Night at the Museum Event

The Dade City museum put on a night time event this past Saturday with glimpses into Florida's rich and colorful history

By Andy Warrener
July 21, 2022

With current temperatures soaring, the Pioneer Florida Museum & Village took their scorching summer season of events indoors. In June, the museum featured a Civil War Homefront event that portrayed an 1864 convalescent hospital in a small Florida town. The 1905 Enterprise Church, which has a large "window shaker" air conditioning unit, was converted to the hospital, complete with a doctor, nurses and wounded soldiers. Inside the main building, presentations on medicine in the 19th Century and civilian life during the war, even samples of black-eyed pea soup were given. About the only thing suffering outside were Civil War reenactors portraying local Home Guard units.

For the museum's second summer installment, they tore a page out of Hollywood cinema with their Night at the Museum event.

Night at the Museum featured eight different docents, dressed in period regalia, depicting either an historical figure or a generic character demonstrating a craft or skill of yesteryear. Museum curator Andy Warrener portrayed Spanish conquistador Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca in the section of the museum dedicated to prehistory and the 16th Century. Adjacent to Warrener, in the covered Cracker porch were museum docents Deanne Absher and Tiffany Davis demonstrating crafts using corn husks. Already on display in the area were two brooms constructed of corn husks.

Continuing counter-clockwise around the museum was historian and author Keith Kohl portraying a soldier from the 2nd Seminole War. Kohl was accompanied by his son Johnathan. Inside the Locket Tool Room, resident carpenter Rob Schuler

and his wife Susan demonstrated different wood-working techniques. Just outside the tool room, museum association trustee Wayne Sweat demonstrated how a linotype was used. The Model 32 Linotype that was donated to the museum by *The Zephyrhills News* and was the very same model that Sweat used early in his career as a journalist.

Next up was Sheyenne McAlister in the Cracker Cowboy section, discussing early cattle ranching in Florida and the role of the Cow Cavalry during the American Civil War. On into the Civil War section of the museum, history teacher and historian Caleb Greinke did a first-person portrayal of Samuel Pasco, who Pasco County is named after.

Lastly, in the World War II section of the museum's main building, Hannah Schultze depicted lady Marines, complete with uniforms, identification patches, manuals and lots of stories.

The museum dimmed the lights to give the night time feel, even though it was still broad daylight at 6 p.m. when the event began.

"Last year we attended a reenactment, so we bought an annual membership in the Pioneer Museum," commented Lynn Smith of Brooksville. "Now we come out to whatever sounds interesting and bring our friends."

It was a bit of a change-of-pace for the museum. Typically, historical presentations are given in the third person point of view. For the Night at the Museum event, the characters truly came to life with first person presentations.

"First person portrayals are difficult because you are limited in what you can say based on the character you are portraying and what time period it is," Kohl said. "For instance, you can't talk about when your character died or about anything that happened after their death. There's also a lot of fun you can have with the public being shocked by their clothing and how each of them carries a soul-capturing device - a camera."

That type of a portrayal was a fresh approach for most of the attendees.

"We have been coming here for years," said Michelle Williams of Dade City, "But we did not expect this unique event. We learned more than usual through the people role playing characters of different eras of the central Florida area."



Above: Museum docent Deanne Absher demonstrated different types of crafts using corn husks.



Left: Museum association trustee Wayne Sweat demonstrates a Model 32 linotype, one like he used himself, with Rebecca Brown and Tanya Wydick of Davenport looking on.



Right: Museum docent David Poe (right) shows guests Marina McNeal and Pharaoh Gayles a miniature diorama of the museum and village.

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The Backyard is coming to city hall's and Main Street's back yard

The outdoor gathering place will try and connect 6th Street and Main Street as pedestrian friendly, as well as feed and entertain

By Andy Warriner
July 28, 2022

If you've spotted the modest sign at the corner of 8th Street and 6th Avenue, you might have wondered just what is going on with that tiny, one-quarter of a city block, just across from the brick edifice of city hall. The space is going to be called, "The Backyard" and it's going to be pretty cool.

Wind the clock back to 2019 when the new city hall was under construction. Then-contractor D.A.B., yes that D.A.B., was working on the project and they needed space. They needed storage space for materials and they needed space for the mobile offices that accompany any building project on that scale. So the city bought that small parcel. Well, when city hall was finally finished, no one knew what to do with that tiny patch of land that was later sodded with grass.

"Originally, we wanted a developer that would build a two-story, live-work space," CRA Director Gail Hamilton said. "But then there was the problem of lacking parking. With no parking, no developer was interested. We started to throw ideas around."

Hamilton got a flash of inspiration while spending time at Sparkman's Wharf at Channelside in downtown Tampa.

"It is a model outdoor venue," Hamilton said. "There were kids playing, a baseball game on TV, people talking, families. I thought that if this works here, we could do a version of that."

One of the big rages in public space design these days is shipping containers. Also known as Conex containers, these very versatile containers are used both in overseas shipping and transcontinental trucking. There's also plenty of them to be had. That became kind of the kick off point for the concept behind The Backyard.

Next, Hamilton took her ideas to Aaron Banks of Furr-Wegman & Banks. The architect began working on some designs. The city used its Facebook page to test the public and see if they liked the designs.

"There were no negative comments," Hamilton said. "They were overwhelmingly, 'yes' responses."

So the amenities began to take shape. It's hot in Florida, so one of the design amenities included "Swamp Fans," large fans that blow air over cold water. They aren't going to turn a 90-degree day into a 70-degree day but it will probably feel pretty good to sit in front of one. The Backyard will feature shade structures with seating underneath. These will be highly visible structures with color changing LED lighting. Most of the rest of the seating area will also be shaded.

Want to eat and drink and listen to some music? Welcome to The Backyard. A covered performance stage will be situated on the west end of the area with a concrete wall covered by a mural. The wall is to give a little bit of a hedge between the Pasco County fire station, just across the alley.

A seating area in front of the stage will be set with artificial grass so residents can bring their picnic blanket or lawn chair. Food trucks will be encouraged to setup along 6th Avenue, even with electric power stations to plug into. The Conex containers will be on the southeast side and will likely serve as retail or food service space. More covered seating is situated along the east portion of the area.

The project is more than just the space, too. It's part of a larger effort to make downtown Zephyrhills more walkable, more interconnected.

"The idea is to connect 5th avenue and 6th avenue," Hamilton said.



Above: Looking west along the south side of 6th Avenue.

Hamilton also sees it as an opportunity to have fewer closures on 5th Avenue (Main Street). Oftentimes for events downtown, 5th Avenue, at least portions of it, are closed to vehicular traffic. The Backyard is also an effort at connectivity. Trees along 8th Street will be lit to encourage foot traffic. The alley between the fire station and The Backyard that extends all the way to 5th Avenue is going to be re-done and only for pedestrians.

The tie-in exists in style, too. The Backyard features brick work on the facade and in select places in order to match the motif of the city hall building. Planters brought in for The Backyard will match the handsome planters that have recently bedecked 5th Avenue. Concept designs were completed in March, engineering designs were completed in June. It won't be long until ground breaks in The Backyard. Bids are going out the end of August.



Above: View of The Backyard facing southwest.



Above: View of the performance space, looking just about due west.

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Kimley-Horn, Wharton-Smith tapped for Hercules Park greenlight

The engineering firm and construction manager are set to break ground on the much-anticipated public park

By Andy Warrener
August 4, 2022

Hercules Park harkens back to an idyllic time in Zephyrhills. In August of 1946, the Hercules Powder Company selected an 80-acre tract of land just north of what then was Zephyrhills city limits to start their operation. What became known as Hercules Powder Company Camp Number 39 began to develop. Hercules Powder Company had a processing plant in Brunswick, Ga. that made all sorts of compounds like: paints, varnishes, adhesives, asphalt, emulsions, even gun powder and dynamite. Camp Number 39 was designed in order to remove yellow, first-growth pine stumps from land cleared in a 25 to 30-mile radius. At Camp 39, the stumps would be trimmed to a standard size and shipped, usually by rail, to Georgia.

It was never meant to be a permanent operation. Even Hercules representative E.C. Mann Jr. said in 1946, that the operations might last 15 years. It lasted 16 years. Yet the company would leave a legacy both material and immaterial. They built between 60 and 80 prefabricated homes for the employees to live in while the camp was in operation and housed 150 people. A culture grew up around it, even after the pine stump operation packed up. Softball teams, community cookouts, it became a social hub. Harriett Morton Weicht from an Aug. 5, 2010 interview by Madonna Jervis Wise and Clereen Brunty recalled a more simple time, growing up in the area.

"It was a different era—a time of safety in which you felt as though you had multiple sets of parents watching out for you. Your houses were left unlocked and keys in your car. It was a very secure place and a wonderful location to grow up."



Above: Crew of the Hercules Powder Company dating back to 1946.

The plant closed in 1962 but the legacy endured. Zephyrhills High School was built on the property in 1975 and Woodland Elementary in 1978. Ownership of the land bounced around between the Pasco County School Board and the City of Zephyrhills. Ideas floated and sank. It now looks as if the remaining property is going to be developed into a community park. Don't roll your eyes. For real this time. The City of Zephyrhills has tapped construction manager Wharton-Smith, Inc. and engineering firm Kimley-Horn & Associates to design and build what will be known as Hercules Park.

The new park will feature a playground area, a 1-acre open play field, a more than 5-acre biking and walking trail, as well as a perimeter or "shell" trail going around most of the park. The choices to design and build the park were not arbitrary. The City of Zephyrhills has a professional services contract agreement with Kimley-Horn. Locally, Wharton-Smith has relevant experience with recreational park projects in the City of Clearwater, City of Sanford, City of Casselberry, and Seminole County. Meanwhile, the firm handled the 25,274-square-foot Woodland Elementary School addition, remodel and renovation.

Below: Concept plan for Hercules Park.



Left: Ariel view of Hercules Powder Company in 1959.



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Superhero theme for chamber banquet

Marvel-ous Z'hills and costumes marked the last chamber banquet for outgoing executive director Melonie Monson

By Steve Lee
August 25, 2022

Superheroes and costumes highlighted Tuesday night's Greater Zephyrhills Chamber of Commerce awards ceremony and installation banquet at Southport Springs Golf and Country Club. The Marvel-ous Z'hills theme marked the last major event for outgoing president Melonie Monson.

Active in the chamber for the past seven years, which include more than six in her current role, Monson plans to focus more on family. With her father, Ron Bahr, having passed away Monson's mother Edna is moving in from her home in Brooksville.

"This is my last hurrah," said Monson, who plans to do marketing for her brother Kevin's business, Bahr's Propane Gas & AC.

Outgoing chairman Randy Stovall noted that under Monson's guidance the chamber was awarded the Florida Association of Chamber Professionals' Chamber Plus Certification (2019) and in 2021 Zephyrhills earned the FACP Online Communication Award for work done during Covid-19 to keep local businesses in the forefront.

Added chairman-elect Edwin Goolsby, "That's probably the only negative, that I don't get to work with Melonie a little bit longer."

Monson's replacement, who already has come aboard, is Vicki Wiggins, who previously worked at Sunrise of Pasco and Saint Leo University.

"She's amazing," Monson said of Wiggins, adding that the chamber "is going to be in capable hands. All the work we've done for the past six and a half years, it's going to keep moving forward."



Above: Jodi Wilkeson, president of the city council, conducts a sworn-in ceremony for the chamber's new officers.

New board members were officially sworn in by Jodi Wilkeson, president of city council. Then came the chamber's top awards.

Before that, however, State Senator Danny Burgess, who donned the uniform of Captain America, was named the Leadership in Government and Economic Development champion. He did not stick around long as he drove up to Trilby to the family farm of Wilton Simpson. His longtime friend and State Senate President was favored in the race for agriculture commissioner.

"I'm going to go right away to Wilton and let him know you picked me over him," Burgess jokingly said, acknowledging that Simpson also was up for the chamber's award.

The first of several major awards was the Diamond, presented to a non-profit for exemplary contributions to the betterment of the Zephyrhills community. That went to the Rotary Club of Zephyrhills Daybreak.

Next came the chamber member of the year with Stovall, a former president of Pasco-Hernando State College, earning that honor. Ambassador of the year was next with longtime chamber member Sam Abrahani receiving that one.

Citizen of the year was bestowed on Paul Correia, who earlier entertained the crowd by playing his guitar alongside fellow guitarist J.C. Vitte. Correia is the founder of the Paulie Palooza Music Festival, which last year set a fundraising record of \$26,000 for Gulfside Hospice.

Next up was small business of the year, which went to Axe of Kindness. The Sarah Vande Berg Tennis and Wellness Center won the large business of the year award.

Lastly, Greg First, who announced Zephyrhills High football games from the press box for 40 years and has emceed downtown parades for decades, received the Alice Hall award. "I just love this community," he said.

Left: Robin Ringeisen shows a cake she chose for her table during the dessert dash.

Below: Sam Abrahani, the ambassador of the year, is flanked by outgoing chamber president Melonie Monson and chairman-elect Ed Goolsby.



Left: Representatives of the Sarah Vande Berg Tennis and Wellness Center with their large business of the year award.



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Coming soon, a distillery near you

Dunamis Premium Spirits has selected Zephyrhills to open up shop and they will be serving the area as early as Nov. 1

By Andy Warrener
September 8, 2022

Zephyrhills has the reputation of being the City of Pure Water. It also has a climate of growth and development. It also has a craft beer house called Zephyrhills Brewing Company. It also has great vehicular access from U.S. Highway 301, State Road 54 and 56. Access to fine adult beverages in Zephyrhills has never looked so good.

"Every great spirit starts with a great water source," Founder and CEO of Dunamis Premium Spirits Victor Young said. "Zephyrhills is a city on the move. It has substantial growth, the political climate is that of growth, it's easy to get into. The elected officials here seem to welcome business and understand growth."



Above: Dunamis is the Greek word for the highest level of excellence.



The former Suntrust building on Gall Boulevard will open in the future as a distillery.

Young has always been a connoisseur of spirits, particularly bourbon and whiskey. He invested in a distillery years ago but found his access to quality control limited.

"I knew that if we were going to attain the highest level of excellence, we would have to do it ourselves," Young said.

Young branded the business Dunamis Premium Spirits. Dunamis is a Greek word for "the highest level of excellence." Dunamis launched in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic delayed the move into operational status but by February of 2022, Young and Dunamis were back at it. In fact, they already have a production facility established at 3885 Correia Dr., near the airport.

It is not open to the public yet but on Nov. 1, the production facility will open as a tasting room from Thursday to Sunday, 12-7 p.m. If the airport is too far of a hike, Dunamis is already getting into the former Suntrust bank building at 5435 Gall Blvd. That facility won't be ready until November of 2023 but when it is, it's going to be one of the swankiest places in town.

The new facility will boast full tours. Patrons sitting at the bar will have full view of the lab, the production space, bottling and canning of spirits. The large bar will seat 30 people. There will also be a 32-seat area for people to relax after tours and sample flights of distilled liquor. An event space will be built upstairs that can accommodate 150 people and be rented out for weddings, parties, corporate events and the like. A small VIP space that accommodates 25 people can also be rented out for smaller, private events.

Bourbon and whiskey are Dunamis's specialties. They also make what are called, "white" spirits - vodkas, rums, gins but the caramel color in bourbon and honey color of whiskey take time; at least three years, to be precise. To qualify as a bourbon, a spirit must have a 51 percent corn mash and it must be aged in virgin white oak, charred barrels for no less than three years. While the white spirits are readily available the bourbons and whiskeys take time and there's no way to shortcut the process.

"We want to have something everyone can buy off the shelf and then we want to have some things that you only bring down off the shelf for special occasions," Young said.

It doesn't stop at spirits, either. Dunamis will have a handsome cigar room with renowned cigar manufacturers JC Newman and Arturo Fuente. They have actually helped Young design the humidor that will be in the new facility. There will also be a retail store where customers can purchase spirits, torches, cigar cutters and the like. Additionally, Dunamis is interested in partnering with other groups and individuals that, like Dunamis, strive for excellence. Young stated that Dunamis would be interested in sponsorships, event hosting and other types of

partnerships with excellence in the community.

Can't wait to go? You'll have to wait at least until Nov. 1. The tasting room by the airport will be ready by then. It's okay. You can't rush a good thing.

"When aging a spirit, you can't do anything to change time," Young said.



Above: Dunamis has already begun distilling operations in Zephyrhills with an outlet near the airport.

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Brew with the Blue at Starbucks

Chief Brewer serves customers at the drive-through in public outreach event at the Zephyrhills coffee house

By Steve Lee
September 15, 2022

Members of the Zephyrhills Police Department, led by Chief Derek Brewer, showed up last Thursday morning at the Starbucks off U.S. 301. There were no public speeches, agendas or arrests for that matter at the public outreach event.

Simply put, Brew with the Blue was all about coffee and conversation.

Best of all, the chief worked the drive-through window with a long line of vehicles around the building for most of the morning. He handed out orders and took payments alongside an employee.

"It was a great opportunity just to have normal conversations about everyday life," Brewer said, adding that working the drive-through "was a little hectic at first but I really enjoyed it. The goal there was to interact with the public. The time flew by."

That it did as he and other department staff members took part of the inaugural event. Brewer, a frequent customer at Starbucks, planned Brew with the Blue with store manager Ana Reyes.

"He's a regular customer and one day we were talking about community events," Reyes recollected. "He asked how we can do something together and I said my store is your store."

While the local police are not always appreciated throughout their various endeavors, such was not the case at Starbucks. For Reyes, it was "a way to tell them thank you because they do so much for the community. They got to be my baristas."

One of the drive-through customers stopped her car after

getting her order and said she has experienced law enforcement at a coffee house before.

"I worked at a Starbucks drive-through and a horse (with a Pinellas Park officer) came through," recalled Katie Montes, who has since relocated to Zephyrhills. "I got to feed the horse."

Inside and outside were several police officers and department staff. Some helped out as volunteer workers while others greeted and chatted with customers.

City councilman Lance Smith stopped by, as did mayor Gene Whitfield.

"I think it helps to build relationships," said Whitfield, an avid supporter of the local police department as well as the Pasco Sheriff's Office. "They're talking about every couple of months doing this, so it's got to catch on. They do a lot of things in this community that people don't recognize."

Also inside was Yvette Klausch, managing funeral director for the Zephyrhills Chapter of Coastal Cremations.

"I love it," she said of the Brew with the Blue concept. "I think it's great to see everybody because I never see some of these people."

Outside the coffee house in the parking lot facing U.S. 301 was a large police van with an awning and table out front. Officer Steve Walker and detective Bill Carmer met with people passing by. Walker also noted that the department is hiring and welcomed those wanting to pursue a job.

"We've got open positions and we're just doing community relations," Walker said.

While there were no police dogs on location, one local resident brought her dog to chat with officer at the outside table. Zephyrhills' Zoja Kubiak had her dog Sadi, a shepherd breed



Above: Members of the Zephyrhills Police Department met Starbucks customers in last week's community event.

who is in training, on a leash.

"I brought her out here to see the uniform," Kubiak said. "It's training for her so she knows cops are the guys to help."

One man who came and appreciated the event was a former police chief in the United Kingdom who preferred not to be named.

"This type of event is building up the reputation of the community," he said.



Above: Officer Steve Walker meets with Zoja Kubiak and her shepherd Sadi.



Above: Zephyrhills Police Chief Derek Brewer and store manager Ana Reyes planned the public outreach event.



Above: Chief Brewer hands out an order.

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Hurricane Ian spares Zephyrhills

East Pasco escapes the devastation felt in other areas with just a few power outages and tree damage left in the aftermath

By Steve Lee
October 6, 2022

Early projections by the national weather service and various emergency management organizations had Hurricane Ian staying out into the Gulf of Mexico and moving parallel northward along the west coast of Florida. As is the case for nearly all storms and hurricanes, however, that trajectory ultimately changed.

Even though the major hurricane veered inward and made landfall in Fort Myers, Zephyrhills and the surrounding areas of east and central Pasco were spared for the most part. The county got off relatively easy compared to other parts of the Sunshine State that suffered devastating flooding, power outages and tree damage due to heavy rains and high winds.

Ian came in as a category 4 hurricane with closures and evacuations taking place in numerous counties and municipalities in west central Florida along with the middle part of that state. The city issued a state of emergency and some power outages and flooding were reported.

"We prepared for the worse and prayed for the best," said Shane LeBlanc, the city's public works director. "We definitely dodged a bullet."

City manager Billy Poe shared that sentiment: "Fortunately enough, we didn't take the brunt of it. Pasco County got so lucky."

A debris cleanup began on Monday. City staff swept through neighborhoods picking up debris from the bands of wind that ripped through the area.

After last Wednesday, LeBlanc said city staff dealt with some power outages that included residences and traffic signals, as well as flooding, the latter of which was a chief concern.

All that paled into comparison of people in south Florida that lost their homes and places like Pine Island and Sanibel Causeway, the latter of which is no longer accessible to the mainland after parts of the road washed away.

"That was the first thing I thought of besides the heartbreak of losing their homes," LeBlanc said of floods.

Poe praised city staff for its preparations and immediate response to the area's comparably minimal damage.

"Staff did a great job preparing the city for the storm," he said, adding that the city's police department stepped up when some traffic signals were out temporarily. "We took all the precautions. We were prepared and staged; ready to go."

As for the county, most government offices were closed late last week. That included libraries, senior centers, building and construction services and extension offices, animal services, parks and boat ramps. Additionally, there was temporary suspension of residential and commercial trash and recycling collection services.

Additionally, the county open emergency shelters, although none were in Zephyrhills. The closest shelter was at Centennial Middle School, just north of the city. Other local shelters included the Cypress Creek High/Middle School complex, Wesley Chapel High, Wiregrass Ranch High, Weightman Middle and Pasco Middle.

Sand bags also were available at Pasco County Fire Rescue Station 29 on Dairy Road.

On a brighter note, Hurricane Ian was not the only historical event that took place last Wednesday when a healthy baby girl actually was born in the parking lot of AdventHealth Zephyrhills.

Hospital officials reported that parents from Sumter County pulled into the parking lot when the mother began experiencing contractions. Clinical care teams rushed outside to deliver baby Kieralynn.



Above: A baby was born in the parking lot of AdventHealth Zephyrhills the day of the hurricane.

By early this week, AdventHealth hospitals in Pasco County (including locations in Zephyrhills, Dade City and Wesley Chapel) resumed normal hospital operations, including regular visitation and outpatient services. That included elective procedures, which were temporarily put on hold as the hurricane made its path across the state.

Below: National Guard was called in to help the recovery efforts in south Florida.



Above: Trees were knocked down in Zephyrhills Park because of the high winds during the storm.

Left: Emergency vehicles from other states including Arkansas, Texas and Tennessee line up to pull into the Flying J on State Road 52 for gas in their journey to help residents of southwest Florida.



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Nelson Ryman passed away at 83

Beloved "Poppi" is remembered as a pillar of the community, devoted to his family and for helping others

By Steve Lee
October 13, 2022

A celebration of life could not have been a more fitting term, alluding to some final goodbyes to the late Nelson Louis Ryman from family and friends on Monday night at the Whitfield Funeral Home. That followed a memorial service at St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church.

A family man, pillar of the community and philanthropist, Ryman passed away on Sept. 30 with his loving wife Dottie by his side. He was 83.

At the celebration of life, three of Ryman's grandchildren — Christian, Chad and Kelli — spoke eloquently of their beloved "Poppi."

"He lived his life, not for himself but for giving back to others," Christian said. "Nelson love life and so many people, something the Lord put in him."

Added Chad, "Poppi loved community, especially here in Zephyrhills. There was never a shortage of people who wanted to spend some time with Nelson Ryman."

Ryman's sense of humor touched many, especially those in his extended family.

"If you knew Nelson well there was always a joke in everything he had to say," said Kelli, taking pride in being the only granddaughter. "Poppi wasn't all fun and games. He wore many hats. He was a true pillar in our community and believed in bettering it."

Echoing that sentiment was Bob Hatfield, a longtime teacher and coach at Zephyrhills High who also has been active in community and political organizations.

"Nelson left such an impact on this whole town," he said. "He cared so much about helping other people."

Ryman, born in Indiana in 1939, was a fixture in the community since moving to Zephyrhills in 1970. He raised his family here and worked in the mobile home business for 50 years until retiring in 2000.

For many years he ran the scoreboard at Bulldog Stadium for Zephyrhills High football games, took an active role in the Daybreak Rotary Club and was part of a small circle of breakfast club locals at the former Barb's Restaurant. Ryman was one of the club's charter members and in 2019 was named Rotarian of the Year.

Bill Cassel, who often was part of what he called an eclectic group at those breakfast gatherings and enjoyed sitting beside Ryman at the Rotary club's meetings, spoke fondly of his friend.

"Everyone was Nelson's best friend," he said at the celebration of life ceremony. "He had limitless love."

Ryman also spread his good cheer internationally by taking part in mission work in Haiti, where he survived a 2010 hurricane.

"The outpouring of love from people there has been very special," Kelli said of people helped by her grandfather, who she witnessed were appreciative of what little they had.

"Poppi," as he was affectionately called by eight grandchildren and great-grandchildren, always had a joke to share with family and friends. Ryman was preceded in death by his first wife Barbara, mother of his sons Kerry and Kevin, along with his parents, Louise and Nelson, and brother Gary. He spent the last 32 years with his second wife Dottie.

Ryman is survived by his wife, Dottie; children, Kevin, Kerry, Angela and Cynthia; grandchildren, Kelli, Chad, Christian, Kyle, Devin, Julian and Kaden; great grandchildren, Max, Tegan, Tenley, Elijah, Zarek, Kason, Kierslyn, and Peyton; his sister, Gale; brothers, Lyle and Mike; and many nieces and nephews.

At the conclusion of Monday night's gathering, Christian put things in proper perspective when he said, "I just love all these memories."



Above: Kerry Ryman, Nelson's only granddaughter, was among the few speakers at Monday's Celebration of Life at Whitfield Funeral Home.



Above: Visitors mingle outside the chapel area, many of whom shared memorable stories about Nelson Ryman.



Above: Brothers Kevin and Kerry Ryman stand alongside a large print of their beloved father, the late Nelson Ryman.

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Passer-by rescues boy from burning home in Oak Creek

VFW Post 854 bestows Lifesaving Award of Valor to local resident Michal Pietrusinski for his courageous effort

By Steve Lee
October 20, 2022

Not everyone would run into a house on fire to save a life, but some people would. Michal Pietrusinski actually did just that.

One afternoon this summer, he and his fiancée, Sharon Navarro, were walking through the Oak Creek neighborhood off Handcart Road, which has a Wesley Chapel address but is located just outside the Zephyrhills city limits. They came upon a neighbor's home with a large amount of smoke coming out of the rooftop.

Pietrusinski noticed a woman and her autistic daughter running toward their home. He grabbed a water hose and sprayed a burning couch, but failed to put out the flames.

Pietrusinski hosed himself down, pulled his wet shirt over his head and crawled into the house. Hearing from the mother that her two boys were autistic, he began calling out to them. He saved one of the autistic boys with Pasco Fire and Rescue coming along to save the other one.

"It's the right thing to do, simple," he said matter-of-factly, as if there were any other choice. "The moment I saw the mother running I asked if she was okay and she said no. That's when I knew something was not right."

Pietrusinski, 36, said he was in the house on his own search and rescue mission for about 30 minutes. He also told the mother to call 911.

"They're non-verbal," he said of the two autistic boys.

"They can't really talk, so I said if you can hear me come to my voice. I couldn't locate the second one."

First responders from a Pasco Fire and Rescue unit did, however, and Pietrusinski, not to mention the mother, was happy that both boys made it out alive.

Pietrusinski said he told the mother, "Your kids are good and she was crying."

For his courageous effort, Pietrusinski accepted a Lifesaving Award of Valor by the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8154 in Zephyrhills. Before last week's regular meeting he was presented a medal and certificate by Post 8154 Commander Scott Krumbholz and Heather Frank, VFW District 12 Commander.

"Any type of award from that kind of organization, and being a veteran myself, it's an honor," said Pietrusinski, who served in the U.S. Navy from 2008 to 2015. "When Larry told me I was really in shock."

He got the call from Larry Pratt, Post 8154's adjutant who supported an application to the VFW's National Office.

"Our post is very pro-police and pro-first responders, as are all our posts," Pratt said. "We always want to try to recognize and support our first responders. They're our hometown heroes."

Part of the award, which makes a reference to Pietrusinski's prompt and lifesaving action, reads as follows: Your personal initiative and prompt response without thought to your personal safety resulting in saving the life of another is one of the highest obligations to humanity. Your valor and heroic efforts will serve as an inspiration to others, and especially the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The award also references

the Plant City Police Department. Pietrusinski joined that police department earlier this year and soon will be a patrolman once he completes his time as an intern.

After the rescue Pietrusinski, an immigrant from Poland who came to the United States in 2003, said he suffered a bit of smoke inhalation and briefly had to use an inhaler.



Above: Michal Pietrusinski receives a medal of valor from VFW representatives Scott Krumbholz and Heather Frank.



Michal Pietrusinski, a Plant City Police Officer who rescued an autistic boy from a home in his Oak Creek neighborhood, receives a Lifesaving Award of Valor from Scott Krumbholz, Zephyrhills Post 8154 Commander.



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Water worries? The scoop on the municipal water situation in Zephyrhills

Could the City of Pure Water be the city without water?

By Andy Warrener
November 10, 2022

It's no secret that development, particularly residential development, has been surging the last few years. Now begs the question, can the city keep up with the increased demand for water? This is not an opinion piece. These are the facts.

The City of Zephyrhills currently pumps 2.4 to 2.5 million gallons of water per day, from its existing wells, for use by its residents. The city is limited in how much water it can pump by the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFMD). SWFMD currently permits Zephyrhills to pump 3.3 million gallons of water per day. There is roughly an 800,000 gallons per day contingency between actual use and permitted use.

Now, what about all of this development? Isn't the need for municipal water going to grow? You bet it is. There are 20 developments that have at least started the application process. Of those, currently 14 have received some sort of approval. Eight of those projects have already broken ground.

Zephyrhills City Manager William Poe Jr. estimated that the 14 projects with some sort of approval will draw 741,000 gallons per day. He estimated about a seven-year time frame for the completion of those projects.

The six additional projects look to be between seven and 10 years out but will increase water demand by roughly 309,000 gallons per day. So the 10-year build out for the 20 projects would increase demand by roughly 1.5 million gallons per day (GPD).

Poof! There goes the 800,000 GPD contingency, right? Not necessarily.

Zephyrhills Utilities Director John Bostic estimated that with just the wells already under municipal control, the city could pump 4.58 million GPD.

The projected need by the year 2040 is 4.39 million GPD,



leaving a contingency of about 190,000 GPD. The hangup is that the city must procure permission from SWFMD to pump that volume of water. It's not an easy sell. Zephyrhills currently draws water from its wells from the Hillsborough River Basin. That basin is a "high use caution area" according to Poe.

In other words, between the environmentally-sensitive area, together with the high use of water in the basin, SWFMD is likely to be very cautious about increasing the amount of permitted water that Zephyrhills may draw, regardless of what the capacity is.

So what's the next step? The very next step is for city officials to convince SWFMD that the need is there and to increase the permit capacity. How do they do this? There's actually a few things they are doing to make the case. One is to convince SWFMD that the people-per-household number they use is inaccurate. SWFMD uses a model with data from the 2020 Census and estimates that there are, on average, 2.1 people-per-household in Zephyrhills.

City officials don't agree. "We're seeing a lot more three, four and five bedroom houses now," Poe said. "Zephyrhills has traditionally been a retiree community. That's changing. We're building larger homes with more bedrooms and the median age of the city is dropping."

Poe and Bostic estimate that the people-per-household number is more like 2.6 instead of 2.1. They are using models from the Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR), an annual report on population demographics produced by the University of Florida.

"Two-point-one was probably accurate a couple of years ago," Poe said. "The last two years, we've seen a significant shift to larger homes."

The unpredictable factor is how fast these 20 slated developments will be ready for municipal water service. The estimate is from seven to 10 years but that could speed up or slow down. Some are moving very fast.

"The Abbott Square development, near the tennis center, already has 100 units going vertical," Bostic said.

City officials met with SWFMD back in the spring. They'll want to come into their next meeting making a case for the permitted increase by indicating the more accurate person-per-household number, modeling of the impact on wells they already control and identifying new sources of municipal water. Demonstrating reduced consumption would also be a good faith measure that would add weight to their case.

Let's break that down. The Florida BEBR numbers are clear cut. That's a pretty easy case to make, simply that the estimating factor that SWFMD is using needs to be adjusted. The impact to current wells is going to be a harder sell. With the Hillsborough River Basin being a protected basin, a "high use caution area," SWFMD is going to be in a difficult position allowing for Zephyrhills to pump more water without setting a precedent for others who draw from the basin to increase their permit requests.

City officials are going to come into the meeting with two things that might tip the scales. One is Utility Service Agreements, the other is identifying new water sources. A Utility Service Agreement is an agreement the city and a developer enter into that guarantees a development their demand for water,



while the developer agrees to pay 50 percent of their capacity fees up front. Two is identifying new sources for water.

There are five possibilities for new sources of municipal water in Zephyrhills. The first is taking ownership of new wells. There is currently a 900-acre track of land in Pasco County that the city is considering incorporating into the Utility Service Area. There are four wells on this property that are estimated to be able to produce 800,000 GPD.

"The development at that property we only estimate to need 500,000 gallons per day, leaving us a 300,000 gallons per day contingency that we hope SWFMD will allow us to use in the city," Poe said.

Another new source would be to interconnect with Dade City. This does not seem as viable an option as Poe stated that Dade City had an even smaller margin of available permitted water than Zephyrhills currently does. The perk to a Dade City interconnect is that Dade City draws from the Withlacoochee River Basin and not the Hillsborough River Basin. The Withlacoochee Basin is not considered a high caution area by SWFMD and the state entity might be far more inclined to increase permitted draws in the Withlacoochee Basin over the Hillsborough River Basin.

Another option would be to acquire other water plants or agricultural wells, close enough to supply the city's needs.

A fourth option would be to construct new wells from the Floridan Aquifer. This is an expensive option, as it requires construction of deep wells and a different purification process. The city currently uses a chlorination process but aquifer water requires a reverse osmosis process which is far more difficult and costly.

The last option is perhaps the most logical, that is, to reduce consumption. Bostic estimates that the city can reduce consumption by 100,000 to 150,000 GPD by implementing things like, using less grass in developments, different types of grass, even artificial grass and also by expanding the reclaimed water system.

City officials have their work cut out for them but they are trying to stay out in front of the issue. Talks with SWFMD are ongoing.

"It all depends on how quickly these subdivisions get built," Poe said. "We don't have a crystal ball but we feel like we can get there, we just have to get SWFMD to agree with us once we have the justification and modeling done."

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