



Manatee Matters

September-October 2021 Newsletter

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website

View from the Chair

Millage Renewal Referendum - Vote YES!



By Tracy Pratt, MCDP

Chair – On November 2nd, the county will hold a special election with only the millage renewal question on the ballot. We urge every Manatee County citizen to vote to renew the millage

and encourage others in your life to do the same. A YES vote for millage renewal IS NOT A TAX INCREASE. It is simply a vote to continue the millage rate approved in 2018.

Does a one mill bump in the millage rate make a difference? Absolutely. Once the original millage referendum passed in 2018 and additional funding became available, the Manatee County public schools *had the highest ranking ever* for student achievement.

But the one mill increase is not permanent. It must be renewed to maintain an adequate funding source for the schools.

The one mill rate passed by a razor-thin 1,500 vote margin in 2018. That represented 51 percent of the vote. This November we expect reasonable citizens of Manatee County to counter the Republicans' false claims and recognize that the renewal is not a tax increase. A YES vote on the referendum means funds will continue to elevate our public schools.

The one mill increase in property tax provided our public schools with the funding necessary to offer

our teachers competitive salaries, give students added instruction, and upgrade career and technical programs.

Democrats in Manatee County support strong public schools. We want a good education for all students in our communities because we recognize education as the backbone of a successful society. Unfortunately, the Republican majority in our state legislature attacked Florida public schools for decades resulting in reduced financial support. Manatee County schools suffered along with other school districts in the state.

To ensure that our children are given the best opportunity to succeed, we must support the basic foundations of public education by adequate and competitive funding of our schools.

Three years ago, Manatee County residents recognized the benefit of supporting their public schools and voted yes in a millage referendum. Let's do it again. For more information, visit <https://manateecountydemocrats.com/support-our-kids>.

The Manatee County Democratic Party is supporting efforts to bring in a strong, affirmative YES for the referendum with phone banks, texting campaigns, canvassing and sharing literature about the special election. We need volunteers to help with these initiatives. Become engaged by signing up on the Manatee Democrats' website <https://manateecountydemocrats.com/take-action>.

Millage Renewal is NOT A Tax Increase

By Wil Clapper – The Millage Renewal referendum is an opportunity for Manatee County citizens to continue supporting public schools by agreeing to renew the current one-mill rate in a special election on November 2.

The millage rate renewal is not an increase in property taxes. Rather, it is a continuation of the mill rate approved by county citizens in 2018. The renewal will not raise tax bills. Since 2018, a home valued at \$300,000 is paying approximately \$23 a month for the one-mill tax. One mill is the equivalent of \$1 for each \$1,000 of property value per year.

Here are positive examples of how the millage rate has benefitted Manatee County public schools:

- Manatee public schools now have a Grade A ranking and sit in 28th place among the 67 school districts in the state.
- The district went from **six** Grade D schools in 2017-18 to **zero** Grade D schools in 2019-20

After being voted in again, the one-mill rate will be in effect for two years, with the next renewal referendum scheduled for 2024.

Funds will be used to:

- Keep the daily 30-minute extended learning time throughout the system. Thirty minutes of daily extra instruction means students accumulate an extra year of schooling if they stay in Manatee Public schools from kindergarten through high school.
- Invest in STEM initiatives and technical job training, which prepare students for increased workplace opportunities and post-high school education. Since 2018, the district has invested more than \$17 million in STEM and vocational programs.

- Provide pay for teachers and support staff comparable to surrounding counties. Since the millage rate increase, there has been less teacher turnover. Starting teacher salary in Manatee last school year was \$51,640, a healthy increase from \$39,000 for starting teachers prior to 2018. In comparison, starting teacher salaries for Hillsborough, Sarasota and Pinellas teachers last year were around \$47,500.
- Enhance arts programs. According to the Florida Department of Education, Manatee County is now the number one visual and performing arts district in Florida, based on the percentage of students enrolled.
- Assist charter schools in accordance with state statutes

The secure funding from the current millage assessment has helped students learn, teachers teach and staff and faculty stay in Manatee County. The renewal of the current millage rate will give all Manatee County public schools a dependable source of funds. More information is available on the Manatee County Democratic Party website,

<https://manateecountydemocrats.com/support-our-kids>.

No taxpayer funds may be used for this type of one-mill special election. All monies targeted for the referendum must come from other sources.

A business and citizen group, ForwardManatee, is accepting donations for an informational campaign supporting the millage renewal special election referendum. For more information and to donate, visit <https://www.forwardmanatee.com/>.

October 4 is the deadline to register to vote in the November 2 special election. Contact the Supervisor of Elections office for registration information. See side panel below.

MCDP Gala Moved to April 24, 2022

By Wil Clapper - The Manatee County Democratic Party's annual fundraising Gala has been postponed until **April 24, 2022**, per Gala co-chairs Lucy Lapides and Robin Sathan, due to the on-going surge in COVID cases in Florida. "The pandemic may delay our Gala, but it won't stop it," said Sathan. "We really, really want to get together in person."

Next April's Gala will be held at GROVE on Main Street in Lakewood Ranch. "We have a great team planning an exciting event," said Sathan. "Please let us know if you'd like to join the team or if you have donation ideas for new, live-auction items." Send your ideas to DemPrecinct521@gmail.com.



Sathan said that the MCDP is busy with a variety of activities, including phone banks, community canvassing, candidate recruitment and training, and a series of live streaming interviews with MCDP Chair, Tracy Pratt.

"We need everyone's financial support to make these things and more happen," said Sathan. Donations to the MCDP may be made via check, PayPal or ActBlue. Visit <https://manateecountydemocrats.com/donate>.

Most Changes to FL Voting Laws "Unnecessary" Says Supervisor Of Elections

By Randy McCrea – Mike Bennett, Supervisor of Elections (SOE) for Manatee County, is not comfortable with most of the changes made by the legislature to Florida's voting laws during the last session. He believes they are "unnecessary."

"Most changes don't make voting harder, just less convenient," he said. "Changes of any sort often have the effect of keeping some people from voting. If someone wants to vote, they will find a way to vote."

The requirement to show identification, such as a driver's license, is reasonable and necessary to avoid voting fraud and is not a new requirement, Bennett indicated. He is a big supporter of vote by mail, and noted that the number of county residents requesting VBM is more than 120,000. The next election, the county will have six early voting sites, one more than the current five.

Bennett has been a witness for various interest groups in court cases. While he was unable to go into detail on the issues, he is not happy with the requirement to have drop boxes manned; drop boxes in Manatee County will only be manned during business hours. He said that much of the new law may change once the court cases are decided. Decisions are expected by the end of the year.

Tracy Pratt, Chair of the Manatee County Democratic Party, has her own ideas about the recent changes in the election laws. "The effects of SB90 show that the Republican-led legislature and Gov. DeSantis are more interested in suppressing the vote than protecting it," she said. "This omnibus legislation makes everything about voting harder - from registering to submitting a ballot. Florida was lauded for its excellent elections processes in 2020, but the Florida GOP ignored that in order to put its efforts toward voter suppression rather than more pressing matters like a global pandemic and increasing environmental concerns."

How to Check Your Voting Status

Here are the steps to check the status of your registration to vote and your application to vote by mail using the Supervisor of Elections (SOE) website. You can contact the SOE if you don't have a computer or internet access.

To Check Your Voter Status on the SOE Website votemanatee.com

- 1) On the left sidebar, click on Voter Information
- 2) Click on Voter Status
- 3) Fill out the form at the bottom of the page
- 4) Click Submit
- 5) Your voter status will appear in a few seconds.

Ways to Contact the SOE Office

Phone: 941-741-3823

Mail: PO Box 1000, Bradenton, FL 34206-1000

Fax: 941-741-3820

County residents can use the SOE website

<https://www.votemanatee.com/> to register to vote and apply to vote by mail. They can also check the status of their registration and application. The website is available in more than 20 languages.

If you don't have a computer and/or internet service you can call the SOE at 941-741-3823 and request forms be mailed to you to register to vote and vote by mail. After submitting the forms, call and check on the status of your applications.

The deadline to register to vote is 29 days before the election. For VBM, the ballot must be received in the SOE office before 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Email: info@votemanatee.gov

Online: votemanatee.com

In Person (8:30 am to 5:00 pm):

600 301 Blvd. W., Suite 108
Bradenton FL 34205



Leaders Working for You

Bellamy's 'Small Things' Are Big Things for Manatee



By Randy McCrea – Elected in November 2018 to represent District 2 on the Board of County Commissioners, Reggie Bellamy serves as the only Democrat on the seven-member Board. His statement that he has done “a lot of small things” is quite an understatement.

“As the only Democrat on the Board, I must pick and choose my battles,” he said. Regarding his working relationship with the other commissioners on the ostensibly non-partisan board he noted, “We have mutual respect and I believe in building bridges, not tearing them down. I believe in saying WE accomplished things as it takes the work of many people to make progress.”

He is working with the county administrator to develop a program of training and implementation of DEI—Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—for county employees.

Bellamy said, “My primary focus has been on public safety, recreational facilities and infrastructure.” He has worked to add sidewalks, street lighting, storm drains and turn signals to prevent accidents at busy intersections throughout the community.

He is seeking to add a pool in Palmetto and a park upgrade in East Bradenton. Other public safety efforts he is engaged with include COVID 19 vaccination clinics in churches and body cameras for the Sherriff's Department.

After George Floyd's death, he got the Board of Commissioners to issue a Black Men and Black Boy proclamation to address racism as a health issue, especially concerning health status and education. He also worked with several legal and law enforcement bodies to offer “civil citations” instead of arrests and referral to teen court for youthful offenders.

Bellamy serves as Chairman of the Port Authority, Third Vice Chairman of the County Board, Chairman of the Public Safety Coordinating Council and is a member of the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transit Authority.

He sees several economic opportunities coming to the Port Authority and helped with organizing a job fair for October 14 at the Bradenton Convention Center. In the areas of public safety and health, he is investigating converting the old county jail in downtown Bradenton into housing and a hospice facility for veterans.

Young Democrats Poised to Start Good Trouble



By Chrissy Fairey – The Manasota Young Democrats learned last month what it means to cause Good Trouble in Florida. One of the organizers said, “We spoke of the power that we hold as a group. We must stand together and cause all the Good Trouble we can, to save our democracy.”

The Young Democrats sponsored a panel discussion and fundraiser that opened a frank discussion on the need for citizens to stand up for what is right. The panel brought together prominent leaders involved with a variety of issues. Sitting on the panel were: Commissioner of Agriculture Nikki Fried, Hillsboro County States Attorney Andrew Warren, former chair of the Environmental Caucus of Florida Janelle Christensen, and President and founder of Kids With Hope Tracey Washington.

Panelists and event attendees discussed a variety of topics including restoration of voting rights, the environment, women’s rights and supporting children of incarcerated citizens as ways Democrats are causing Good Trouble in Florida. The event raised \$2,700, which will be used by the Manasota Young Democrats for future programs.

Attendees were encouraged to think of ways to create Good Trouble and stand against the current of hate, misinformation and voter suppression in Florida. Some ideas of how to bring about change include running for office, joining a politically active organization, engage in voter outreach events and speaking up when one encounters someone spreading hate.

Information on how to become engaged with the Manatee Young Democrats and other organizations can be found at manateecountydemocrats.com.

School Board Extends Mask Mandate

Wil Clapper – Rev. James Golden, Vice-chair of Manatee County School Board, was successful in extending the existing mask mandate in the schools to Oct. 29 at the board’s meeting Aug. 24.

The extension passed on a 3-2 vote and stipulates an opt out for students and district employees.

Rev. Golden received support from Chairman Charlie Kennedy and board member Mary Foreman. Board members Gina Messenger and Chad Choate opposed

Democratic Black Caucus Joins Haitian Relief Efforts



The Manatee County Democratic Black Caucus is supporting a donation drive to help families impacted by last month’s earthquake in Haiti. Thanks to MCDP State Committeewoman, Florence Shelton-Clark, who spearheaded this effort, the MCDDBC teamed up with Ministry of Presence to collect first aid and personal health and

the measure.

Days after the Commission's vote, a state judge ruled that Gov. Ron DeSantis' executive order banning mask mandates in schools was unconstitutional. The issue is unresolved pending the state's appeal of the judge's decision.

The night of the board meeting the number of cases among students and employees approached 1,200 for the first two weeks of school. All of last school year the district reported 1,119 cases.

hygiene items, canned food, towels, bed linens, tarps and tents, which are being delivered to relief agencies working in Haiti.

Donations may be dropped off at Pratt Law Building, 701 8th Ave. W., Palmetto, and D&D Restaurant, 2401 2nd Ave. E. Palmetto. Pick up of items can be arranged through Michelle Grimsley, MCDBC president, mnggrimsley@gmail.com.

Monetary donations can be made payable to Ministry of Presence, Inc., PO Box 784, Oneco, FL 34264. Ministry of Presence is a 501(c)3 organization. For more information, visit <https://manateedemblackcaucus.org/>.



Haitian Relief - Food Distributed



Supplies Transported



Food Obtained with Donated Funds

State Schedules Comment for Piney Point Well

By Wil Clapper – Manatee County residents have an opportunity to comment on a \$10 million injection well for Piney Point that officials hope will eliminate a potential environmental disaster.

The county and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection will conduct a public hearing Wednesday, Oct. 6, 4 to 7 p.m. at the Central Library, 1301 Barcarrota Blvd., Bradenton, to gauge public reaction to the injection well plan. Written comments can be sent to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Aquifer Protection Program, 2600 Blair Stone Road, MS 3530, Tallahassee, FL 32399-2400 by the end of September.

In a related development, ManaSota-88, a long-time non-profit environmental organization in Manatee and Sarasota counties, asked the Manatee County Commission to rescind its application for the injection well. It is unclear whether the county will take up the matter.

Seasonal rain continues to raise the level of wastewater in the ponds that sit atop the stacks of phosphogypsum. To relieve the prospect of the ponds overflowing, wastewater is being carried to county water reclamation sites.

If the ponds overflow, leak or breach the earthen containment walls, area homes will be threatened and nutrient-rich water will pour into Tampa Bay. FDEP says the site can hold an additional 10 inches of rain

Years of Neglect Led to Piney Point Disaster Threat

[The prospect of millions of gallons of toxic wastewater rushing to the Gulf of Mexico by way of Piney Point is a real threat to Manatee County. Manatee Matters takes an historical look at the situation at Piney Point.]



A nearby home's backyard view of a Piney Point stack. (Photo courtesy of author.)

By Mary Moretto – For decades, companies have consumed vast areas of Florida for mining operations and the production of fertilizer. While the mining industry has contributed to Florida's economic growth, processing raw, natural resources creates mountains of toxic waste and lagoons of contaminated water. The legacy of mining further created the environmental disaster in Manatee County known as Piney Point.

The mining companies reaped their profits and ran, leaving Florida to deal with repeated threats to public safety and the environment. Much of the blame for situations like Piney Point rests with state and local authorities who kowtow to the industry and green-light temporary solutions to a perpetual and escalating environmental problem.

Producing phosphate fertilizer creates a toxic and slightly radioactive waste byproduct called phosphogypsum that is stored in huge piles called stacks. The two phosphogypsum stacks at Piney Point represent the highest elevation in Manatee County.

Piney Point's stacks are topped by ponds filled nearly to the brim with hundreds of millions of gallons of a mixture of fertilizer processing waste, dredged material from Port Manatee and storm water.

In April, workers found a breach in one of Piney Point's plastic liners, which signaled the possibility that a 20-foot wall of contaminated water could inundate the surrounding area. More than 300 homes and businesses in Piney Point's shadow were evacuated while the Florida Department of Environment Protection (FDEP) released 215 million gallons of wastewater into Tampa Bay to reduce the pressure and temporarily repair damage to the liner.

The wastewater from the ponds is nutrient-rich and is thought to be a factor in red tide blooms as well as the rapid die-off of seagrass, which is the main food source for manatees.

The phosphogypsum stack's radioactive dust has been linked to respiratory effects in humans and animals, and the contaminated ponds seep into groundwater and wells.

The environmental crisis at Piney Point prompted conservation groups to sue the state, FDEP, HRK Holdings LLC (former Piney Point site owner) and the Manatee County Port Authority. The suits charge that the state had known for decades that Piney Point, “threatens imminent and substantial endangerment to Floridians’ lives, health and environment.”

Separately, Neighbors of Piney Point joined in a class-action lawsuit against bankrupt HRK citing the “toxic contents” on its land.

In June, a letter from the Manatee Democratic Party to FDEP opposed the Mosaic Company’s recent application to increase phosphogypsum stacks in Polk County because waste from that operation would eventually find its way to Piney Point.

In August, a judge appointed a bankruptcy receiver to clean up and oversee closing of the facility.

Manatee County assumed control of the site and presented a plan to inject contaminated water 3,000 feet below underground sources of drinking water. Manatee County appropriated \$10 million for the well project and FDEP approved the concept as the cheapest and quickest way to resolve the problem.

An injection well concept was explored in 2012. But environmentalists, scientists and residents raised concerns about the well’s impact on the aquifer. The Manatee County Commissioners scrapped those plans.

Those who live in the shadow of Piney Point are not the only ones who suffer. As more is learned about the way local officials handled Piney Point, tourism dollars may dry up, developers will not attract home buyers and businesses will leave Manatee County for safer areas.

Canvassing: A Way to Engage Future Voters

By Wil Clapper – The thought of knocking on strangers’ doors and asking if they are registered to vote or enrolled in vote by mail is intimidating. But it doesn’t have to be.

That’s what I discovered when I joined a two-person team on a Sunday afternoon voter outreach effort with the Manatee Blue Wave Coalition and Indivisible Manatee in partnership with the Manatee County Democratic Party.



“It was my first time and I loved it,” said Linda Crepeau of her canvassing experience. Her reaction echoed mine. People were courteous, non-threatening, listened to what we volunteers had to say and accepted prepared literature.

“The reality is there’s not a lot of people at home. But it’s worthwhile if all we do is pass out literature,” said Tim Eisler, a veteran of many canvassing events. “The door tags have information about registering to vote, voting by mail, what the Democrats support, and near-by COVID vaccine clinics. That’s positive. I can’t say I’ve ever run into an intimidating person.”

Just meeting and engaging voters is not difficult, according to Matt Lipinski. “It’s pretty easy. We target neighborhoods that have a lot of Democrats, so we don’t have any resistance. We talk about the issues

and have a conversation with people. If there's no answer, we leave a hang tag on the door."

Canvassing teams are given a detailed printout of the targeted neighborhood called the walk list. The walk list indicates only Democrats in the neighborhood and whether they voted in previous elections. That information comes directly from the Supervisor of Elections and is a matter of public record.

The targeted neighborhood is divided into sections with each team assigned a specific section. The teams are limited to two hours of canvassing in the neighborhood and are not expected to visit every home on the list.

"Volunteers want to feel their efforts are meaningful," said Eisler. "It's not onerous. You're not walking block after block. All the places we visit are contiguous.

"One thing we do is counteract the argument that Democrats are only seen when we want their vote," Eisler continued. "It's our way to bring people the information they need. It's a well-rounded approach to reach out to the community."

The interaction is important to Valerie Young, another veteran canvasser. "I like being in the community and letting people know the benefits of voting and what they can do. Voting is power they don't know they have."

Thinking About Running for Office?



By Jeff Orenstein – The Manatee County Democratic Party recently formed a Candidate Committee that is charged with recruiting, training and supporting viable Democratic candidates for public office. The committee's objective is to help recruits become winners by equipping them to handle modern campaigns. Committee members vet and guide candidates and volunteers in effective campaign training.

The committee plans to offer guidance and perspective along the way from experienced

Democratic campaign professionals and volunteers. Tools will be developed to assist candidates and volunteers with campaign videos, social media presence and fundraising.

"Our goal is to contest and win elections for Democrats and bring about a blue wave in Manatee County and better public policy for our citizens," said Jeffrey R. Orenstein, Chair, Candidate Development and Training Committee. "We are on the lookout for good candidates, with or without prior political experience, to run for all offices on the ballot."

- Do you agree with how our city, county and state elected officials govern?
- Are you offended by leaders who jump to the head of the vaccine line?
- Do you feel your rights as a woman, parent, person, voter are endangered?
- Are you outraged by the systematic destruction of our environment?
- You can be the instrument for change in Manatee County by running for elected office.

The committee is also seeking volunteer campaign staff across the full spectrum of what modern campaigns require including managers, field directors, volunteer coordinators and treasurers.

If you would like to help staff a campaign or if you are considering a run for public office, get in touch with

Get Your SWAG On!



SWAG stands for “Stuff We All Get” the handouts one usually gets at events—you know, like keychains, pens, coffee mugs, etc. These items help promote whatever is on the item. So, check out the SWAG available for purchase on the National Democratic Party website: <https://store democrats.org/>



How to Get Involved



Meet like-minded people at fun events happening this fall. See a list at <https://manateecountydemocrats.com/events>



The Manatee County Democratic Party is a 100% volunteer organization. All contributions of any size are appreciated. \$22/month goes a long way to help elect Democrats in the 2022 elections.

Donate Now

Manatee County Democratic Party
435 Cortez Road West
Bradenton, Florida 34207
(941) 301-4336



Contact Us



