

# Community Opposition Rises to Mayor's Controversial "PURE" Wastewater Project

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Supported by 18 Tampa neighborhood associations and community organizations, stakeholders on Mayor Castor's "PURE" reclaimed water project today announced their opposition to what they called a misguided, risky, inequitable and unnecessary allocation of city resources.

The following letter is being sent to Mayor Jane Castor and members of Tampa City Council:

*Opposition to PURE Funding September 12, 2022*

*Dear Mayor Castor and members of Tampa City Council,*

*We represent citizens who are concerned about the safety and cost of PURE, which is estimated at \$3.4 billion or more over the next 30 years. As proposed by the City, the project would use 50 million gallons of highly treated wastewater per day to: (1) mix with our drinking water in the Hillsborough River Reservoir; (2) use it for Minimum Flows, i.e., "freshwater" released into the Hillsborough River during much of the year, when water does not naturally flow over the dam; and (3) inject it in the aquifer for use. This wastewater, produced by Tampa's sewage system, is currently treated to a lower level and released into Tampa Bay.*

*A list of questions presented by citizens to Mayor Castor and city staff in March remain unanswered (see attached). Although Council approved \$1.2 million in February to research alternative options for beneficial uses of the wastewater, and to educate the public and receive feedback from citizens, none of this has occurred. There has been no accounting as to how the initial funds allocated to the PURE project have been spent. Instead, the Administration is seeking an additional \$1.1 million in funding..*

*We say NO to any additional PURE funding until there are answers to basic questions:*

- 1. How are you going to treat the water so that it will be **safe**?*
- 2. Is PURE **necessary**? What are the **other alternatives**?*
- 3. How much will it **cost**? How much will utility bills go up to pay for it?*

*Safe, affordable drinking water must be a priority for the City of Tampa. We are opposed to putting treated wastewater into the aquifer or into the Hillsborough River without scientific proof that it will be safe for wildlife and humans. Until PURE is shown to be needed, safe and affordable, funding for it must be stopped. We therefore ask the Mayor and Council to oppose further funding.*

*Regards,*

*Friends of the Hillsborough River  
League of Women Voters Hillsborough County*

*Sierra Club Tampa Bay Group*  
*League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), District 1*  
*Virginia Park Neighborhood Association*  
*Southeast Seminole Heights Civic Association*  
*Palma Ceia Pines Neighborhood Association*  
*Southtown Park Homeowner's Association*  
  
*Davis Islands Civic Association*  
*Armory Gardens Civic Association*  
*Bayshore Gardens Neighborhood Association*  
  
*University Square Civic Association*  
  
*THAN Tampa Homeowners Association of Neighborhoods*  
*League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), District #1*  
*Center For Economic Development*  
  
*Old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association*  
  
*Ballast Point Neighborhood Association*  
  
*Wellswood Civic Association*  
*Gandy Civic Association*  
  
*Palma Ceia West*  
*Sunset Park Homeowner's Association*  
*Interbay - South of Gandy Neighborhood Association*  
  
*Hampton Terrace Neighborhood Association*

How did we get here? During the past 22 months a group of stakeholders, comprised of representatives of the Hillsborough League of Women Voters, Tampa Bay Sierra Club and Friends of the Hillsborough River, have regularly met with top city staff in an attempt to arrive at a safe affordable approach to meeting Tampa's future water needs. After over 30 hours of meetings, as well as consultation with members of Council and regional water experts, we have concluded that the "PURE" project is **too risky, too expensive and not needed or the foreseeable future**. We instead urge the City to work with Tampa Bay Water on a regional solution to future needs, as do all other cities and counties in this area, and to refocus on conservation and a strategic expansion of the "purple pipes" program to use this water safely for irrigation, among other sensible approaches.

It has become clear during our discussions that the Tampa water department is dead set on pursuing one option out of many: treating 50 mgd, of potentially toxic wastewater, using some of it for the minimum flow of the Lower Hillsborough River, attempting to sell some of it to Tampa Bay Water, and storing the unused remainder in the aquifer until needed, and, when needed, pump it into the Reservoir to be used for drinking water. All this under the guise of 'drought-proofing'. This approach ignores how

the likelihood of Florida experiencing a future drought is minimal and declining with climate change. As communities in the southwest U.S. are now experiencing worsening drought, Tampa and the southeast U.S. are going in the opposite direction, with heavier rainfall events and higher annual totals.

For the past few decades, Tampa has been attempting to transform wastewater into drinking water. You may remember the (Toilet to) TAP project. The first draft of “PURE” was essentially TAP. At the suggestion of the stakeholder group, City Council ordered city staff to investigate a wider range of alternatives to “PURE”. Up to 8 alternatives were eventually proposed.

With growing persistence, Tampa staff has refused, or reluctantly agreed, to seriously discuss these alternatives, including other possible solutions, such as postponing the deadline, joining with other Florida water departments in amending the legislation, or considering the benefit to Tampa Bay from the addition of 50 mgd treated freshwater. The City has failed to date to engage in honest discussion or unbiased education with the public about alternatives to TAP. It is now obvious that the City has never been interested in pursuing any option other than TAP.

**From the very beginning in 2020, members of the stakeholders group, have asked the City three questions:**

- 1. How are you going to treat the water so that it will be safe?**
- 2. Is PURE necessary? What are the other alternatives?**
- 3. How much will it cost? How much will utility bills go up to pay for it?**

**To date, we have not received a satisfying response to our questions.**

Safe, affordable drinking water must be a priority for the City of Tampa. We oppose putting treated wastewater into the aquifer or into the Hillsborough River without scientific proof that it will be safe for wildlife and humans. Until “PURE” is shown to be needed, safe and affordable, funding for it must be stopped. We therefore now ask Tampa City Council to oppose any further funding.

Safety: It is not safe for drinking. The 50 mgd will include hundreds of pharmaceuticals, industrial waste, PFAS and other Forever Chemicals, all of which now lack the type of federal and state safety standards that Tampa uses to assure residents that our water today is safe. We have no qualms whatsoever regarding current safety, as it is proven by testing against standards. It is therefore not possible for Tampa to test the cost effectiveness of any treatment process without standards established by EPA and FL DEP that to measure results against. The City has instead consistently proposed a treatment method that might be “affordable” vs. one that would be safe, such as reverse osmosis – the most expensive alternative, and the choice of truly drought stricken cities, such as San Diego, that are now forced to consider augmenting their water supply with their treated wastewater.

Cost: Likely to exceed \$3.4 Billion over the length of the project. The City has so far refused (or been unable) to release the actual cost of the project or the cost to ratepayers.

Need: As to need, it is not needed. In 20 years, it is estimated that the City of Tampa will need another 5 million gallons of freshwater per day to meet future demand, based upon projected population growth in the City, an amount that Tampa could save through conservation and repair of aging, leaky pipes. Participation in Tampa Bay Water’s regional supply system would further guarantee no shortages are experienced, even if projections of increased rainfall do not prove to occur.

Tampa City Council previously approved funding, on condition that the City does meaningful education and outreach to the public. To date, no meaningful and unbiased outreach has taken place. Stakeholders consistently have been fed incomplete information. This approach by the City has added to our skepticism.

Tampa City Council votes Thursday September 15 on whether to further fund "PURE". We now urge Council to oppose continuation of the project and vote this project down. We don't need it, it costs too much, and it will not provide the river and the citizens of Tampa Bay with safe drinking water.

*Nancy Stevens, Conservation Chair of Tampa Bay Sierra Club, says: "After 20 months of trying to work with the City and raising concerns and questions about PURE, we find that these questions and concerns remain unanswered, and the City continues on a path to sell an expensive wastewater reuse project that could jeopardize human and environmental health if done improperly while trying to hide its actual costs. Therefore, at this time, a concerned group of citizens request that the PURE project be stopped."*

*Tim Keeperts, President of Old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association: "Our association is opposed to PURE - as we have yet to be guaranteed that injecting "treated wastewater" into the aquifer is 100% safe for our neighbors. Some residents utilize wells for their drinking and irrigation water, and for those on city water, they too who would be forced to drink from "toilet to tap" after it has been processed by our water department."*

#### **"PURE" stakeholders group:**

The **Sierra Club** is America's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization, with millions of members and supporters. In addition to protecting every person's right to get outdoors and access the healing power of nature, the Sierra Club works to promote clean energy, safeguard the health of our communities, protect wildlife, and preserve our remaining wild places through grassroots activism, public education, lobbying, and legal action. The Tampa Bay Sierra Club has more than 2,500 members and more than 13,000 supporters and allies in Hillsborough County. For more information, visit [www.sierraclub.org](http://www.sierraclub.org).

**Friends of the Hillsborough River** is a citizens group of over 1000 local residents that, for the past 23 years, has advocated for a daily minimum flow of clean, unpolluted freshwater to benefit fish and wildlife in the Hillsborough River below the Dam through the restoration and maintenance of Tampa Bay's tidal estuary nursery in the River.

The **Hillsborough League of Women Voters** is the local branch of a nonpartisan, grassroots nonprofit dedicated to empowering everyone to fully participate in our democracy, one of more than 750 Leagues active across the country, we engage in advocacy, education, litigation, and organizing to protect every American's freedom to vote.

**THAN:** The Tampa Homeowners Association of Neighborhoods (THAN) was founded in 1988 to serve as an umbrella organization for the neighborhoods within the City of Tampa.