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## Zephyrhills may halt development to get a grip on water use

By BARBARA BEHRENDT, Tampa Bay Times

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Zephyrhills is nearing the maximum water use allowed under its existing permit.

Photo by DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD/Tampa Bay Times

Facing a daunting things-to-do list, the Zephyrhills City Council this past week unanimously gave its first approval to a yearlong development moratorium.

The move, which will get its final vote in two weeks, will allow the city to pause new development and annexation applications, giving officials time to get a handle on future growth. Most importantly, the city is working to increase its water-use permit, which limits how much water the city can use for existing customers and promise to future development.

Currently, the city is nearing its maximum water use allowed under the existing permit.



In addition, city officials want to review impact fees, an assessment charged to new development to pay for the effect of growth on city services ranging from roads to parks. They also will discuss potential new limits on housing density and negotiate with the county and the state over transportation needs.

A year is a short time to get all of that done, warned council president Lance Smith. Still, he said it was the right thing to do to make sure that Zephyrhills has water not just for incoming development but also for current customers.

The water pinch is ironic because Zephyrhills' motto is "City of Pure Water" and it may be best known for its water bottling plant producing the Zephyrhills brand of water.

"We're trying to be proactive," said City Manager Billy Poe of the moratorium. "We're coming very close to our water-use permit, the allocation we're allowed to pump."

To analyze where the city stands with current use, water use already promised to development projects in the pipeline and other new developments on the horizon, he said the city needs to put on the brakes for a bit.

The city has a current water-use permit with the Southwest Florida Water Management District that authorizes it to use 3.3 million gallons per day, but there were times this past winter where usage crept over the 3-million-gallon mark. Projections show the need would top 4 million over the next 20 years. Poe has already sought the permit expansion.

Zephyrhills has seen tremendous growth in recent years, with the population topping 17,000, making it Pasco's largest city in the 2020 census.



The moratorium won't stop development applications already filed, but those in the earliest stages will be warned that approvals will be based on the availability of water capacity.

As news of the city's discussion of a moratorium spread, a batch of new applications has appeared, but city staff acknowledged that none of them were surprises. Minor modifications to existing but not-yet-built developments will still be allowed, as will small-scale building on lots an acre or less.

City officials are slated to meet in the coming weeks with the county about water issues. In the longer term, they also want to talk about concerns they share with Pasco over growing traffic congestion.

Talks with the city's impact fee consultant have begun, another process that could take months to complete. Smith said he planned to keep reminding city staff of the ticking clock to get all of those chores done.

City Council on Monday also approved the annexation of 7 acres owned by Blue Triton, the company that took over running the Zephyrhills bottled water plant from Nestle several years ago. The company plans to use another 128,632 gallons of water a day over the next five years.

Poe said Triton's operation is the largest water user in the city but it won't affect the current water situation. The water management district has determined that bottled water operations account for less than 1% of all water use in the district.