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A Florida city famous for its water worries that it might run out of it

As Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis touts the state's growth, Zephyrhills hits the pause button

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ZEPHYRHILLS, Fla. — In this fast-growing Florida city, water seemingly abounds.

It's in the Zephyrhills plastic bottles filled from the community's sparkling springs and sold in supermarkets nationwide. It glistens from a lake surrounded by trees and park benches. And it flows from a clover-shaped fountain outside city hall.

But as the "City of Pure Water" experiences a population boom, officials here are warning that the vital resource is increasingly in short supply. The population of Zephyrhills has skyrocketed over the past decade, and the surrounding Pasco County area outside Tampa is now one of Florida's most popular destinations for new arrivals. Faced with a spike in demand, officials recognized that even a city famed for its water can't keep up.

So, in June, the Zephyrhills City Council passed a one-year moratorium on approving new construction, hoping to flatten the city's water usage after it came dangerously close to hitting the maximum allowance this year.

"We need to pump the brakes and get the developers to slow down," said Ken Burgess, a council member and building contractor. "Let us just take a breath."

The decision has added fuel to a mounting challenge in the Sunshine State. Florida is the nation's fastest growing state, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, part of a larger shift that picked up steam during the pandemic and continues. The new Floridians include retirees but also young families, tech workers and others lured by jobs, warm weather and low taxes.

The rapid growth has become part of Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis's platform for the GOP presidential nomination, and he frequently boasts that 1,000 people move to Florida each day. But that boom has come at a cost, raising real estate prices and putting ever more strain on the environment and essential services — including the provision of water.



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Florida is full of water — many areas that flooded in last year's devastating hurricanes have yet to recover — but bringing it up from underground, treating it to make it drinkable, and piping it to homes and businesses without upsetting the state's complex natural water system has become increasingly difficult and expensive.

“I think the water's there. It's just that, are we going to have access to it, with the growth we're getting?” said Zephyrhills council member Steve Spina, who proposed the moratorium. “Or do we have to change how we play the game?”

For Zephyrhills, growth brought a difficult choice: keep expanding at a rapid pace or risk exceeding water pumping limits that all cities must follow — and end up with potentially damaging environmental impacts and a hefty fine.

Other Florida cities are likely to face this decision as homes are built, businesses expanded and condominium units filled. The state's Department of Environmental Protection concluded in its 2021 annual water supply report that “Florida's current fresh water supply is projected to be unable to meet all of the growing needs of Floridians in the future.”

“I think the moratorium is a courageous step, and I'm glad they did it. I think we're going to have to see more places do it,” said Ryan Smart, the executive director of the Florida Springs Council, which advocates for springs conservation. “These 1,000 people a day coming into the state are not paying for the negative consequences of the growth.”

A crystal spring

Zephyrhills was made famous in 1964 when a local business began drawing water from nearby Crystal Springs and selling it to tourists. Two decades later, the French bottler Perrier bought the business, and in 1987, Nestlé purchased Perrier and launched the Zephyrhills brand nationwide.

Many know the product by its label, which pictures a spring of sparkling blue water surrounded by lush greenery and a bright yellow sun. Beneath the Zephyrhills name, the company notes that the bottle contains “100% Natural Florida Spring Water.”

The water in those bottles comes from springs, and not Zephyrhills’ water supply, which is drawn from wells in agricultural fields outside city limits. Nestlé sold the business to two investment firms in 2021 that now operate under the name BlueTriton.

The company also owns the Pure Life brand, which purchases city water to fill its bottles. The BlueTriton bottling plant, which processes both brands, accounts for more than 14 percent of the city’s water usage.

Asked about the company’s water use in Zephyrhills, a spokeswoman said BlueTriton works in partnership with the city and supports “planning for future availability.”

For most of its existence, Zephyrhills was a quiet retirement town. It got its name in 1910 from a Pennsylvania Civil War veteran who wanted to make it a settlement for other aging veterans. Capt. Howard B. Jeffries liked the “gentle, zephyr-like” winds that blow over the hilly landscape.

The town’s location inland, among orange groves, cattle pastures and lakes — and more than an hour from the nearest beach — attracted fewer people than Gulf Coast cities during most of the 20th century. But as the Tampa metro area burgeoned, communities farther east, including Zephyrhills, began experiencing a boom.

In 2010, the city had a little over 13,000 residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau; as of last year, it had nearly 20,000 — a 53 percent increase.

Christine Mitchell and her family moved to Zephyrhills three years ago from Wesley Chapel, another fast-growing Tampa suburb in Pasco County. She said they were drawn to the city’s simple charms, including a downtown district featuring brick-lined sidewalks, two barber shops, a brewery and other locally owned businesses.

She opened a vintage-goods store in downtown and lives with her husband above the shop.

“Everyone that comes in my shop tells me how quaint the town is,” Mitchell said. “It brings back small-town memories. It reminds me of a Hallmark movie.”

The city has to get permission from the Southwest Florida Water Management District to increase the amount of water it pumps from underground. Its current allowance is 3.3 million gallons per day, which it came close to reaching this year. It has filed an application to increase its allowance to more than 4 million gallons a day.

The executive director of the regional water district, Brian Armstrong, said his agency had renewed Zephyrhills’ water permit just three years ago. His agency controls how much water cities, counties and other large water users can draw from the Floridan aquifer. Zephyrhills went through a permitting process in 2020 that included projected increases through 2040.

“And now they’re coming in saying they need to modify that,” Armstrong said. “It’s surprising that they came in 15 years early for more quantities.”

The strain on the city’s water supply is already the talk of residents, developers and real estate investors, testing the limits of how long Florida’s population boom can last.

“We all used to be asked, ‘What’s the most important thing about real estate?’ It’s location, location, location,” real estate investor David Waronker told the Zephyrhills City Council in May.

Now, he said: “It’s water, water, water.”

‘Smart growth’

DeSantis grew up less than an hour away from Zephyrhills, and he has said that protecting the state’s environment is a priority. But as he highlights Florida’s population growth on the campaign trail, conservationists say some of his most recent policies are directly in conflict with his stated priority of protecting natural resources, especially water.

A law the governor signed last month will make it more difficult and expensive for citizens to challenge new development. Another new measure allows developers and businesses to sue county and city governments over “arbitrary and unreasonable policies,” which environmentalists and others say preempts efforts by local governments to manage growth.

Activists point to projects such as [a new interchange](#) on Interstate 95 in Volusia County that the state is spending \$92 million to build. Local residents and officials oppose the interchange, saying it will open the area to more development and will damage the watershed, including Spruce Creek, a waterway that was put on the state’s priority list for protection in 1990.

The interchange project was pushed by [Mori Hosseini](#), a politically connected housing developer who has donated to DeSantis’s campaigns and who owns two large tracts of largely forested land abutting the planned interchange.

“I think, for the current administration, the focus is so much on the short term and new development. That means more money coming into the state, but it’s very shortsighted,” said Democratic state Rep. Lindsay Cross of St. Petersburg, an environmental scientist. “I don’t think smart growth is a winning campaign issue for him.”

DeSantis spokesman Jeremy Redfern did not respond directly to a request for comment on the state’s efforts to balance environmental protection and growth, and he did not comment on claims from conservationists that the governor is falling short on his promises. Instead, he sent a list of what he called “historic investments” in environmental projects, including \$500 million toward restoration work in the Everglades and \$31 million to fight red tide and other algal blooms.

Florida has more freshwater springs than any other state, and they are intricately tied to the Floridan aquifer, the underground river that provides 90 percent of the state's drinking water. The biggest threats to the springs are pollution from farms and residential areas — and reduced flow because of groundwater pumping.

When cities pump too much water, that can lead to saltwater intrusion into wells and ecological damage to springs, lakes and rivers and to the wildlife and plants that depend on the wetlands. It also can lead to sinkholes that collapse pockets of earth and even swallow entire homes. Zephyrhills is in a region of Florida already known as “sinkhole alley.”

Over-pumping also can be expensive: In 2009, for example, the water utility in Tampa was threatened with a \$1 million fine for drawing more water than permitted.

The state Department of Environmental Protection estimates that as demand for water grows in the next two decades, groundwater resources will be “insufficient” in large areas of the state. To cope, the department is exploring options. The legislature recently approved \$190 million of state funding for “alternative water supplies” such as desalination plants.

Armstrong, of the Southwest Florida Water Management District, said alternatives to pumping from the aquifer are also helpful, including conservation and using reclaimed water — highly treated wastewater. He expressed confidence that communities such as Zephyrhills always will find a source of water. It just might come at a higher price than many are willing or able to pay.

“Florida’s a peninsula. We will never run out of water,” he said. “We’re going to run out of cheap water, but we will never run out of water.”

Subdivisions galore

Putting the brakes on growth in Zephyrhills at a time when many Florida cities are rolling out the red carpet for developers struck some as bold. Residents have rallied around it. But the council member who proposed the moratorium said officials know they can pause development only for so long.

“People in town aren’t opposed to growth, but I think they’re a little hesitant or afraid of the pace of it — that every time you turn around, there’s a new subdivision,” said Spina, one of the Zephyrhills council members. “I think they want to pace it better somehow. And I don’t know if that’s possible.”

Pasco County, Spina said, “is full steam ahead” on approving developments — including one that features what developers call the largest man-made lagoon in the country, a 15-acre, 33 million-gallon swimming spot.

“We’re the small guy in the big pond,” Spina said of his city’s efforts to manage growth.

Meanwhile, Zephyrhills is putting other limits on what developers who already have building permits can do — for example, banning the requirement by some homeowners associations that all yards must be planted with St. Augustine grass, which requires frequent irrigation and fertilization.

Holly Champion and her husband have replaced their St. Augustine grass with a variety native to the area, and they plan to install a rain barrel to do their part for water reuse.

The couple moved to Zephyrhills last year, enthralled by the quiet countryside on the city's outskirts and charmed by its downtown. They bought a house in one of the new developments and, in just a few months, saw even more home construction and road building going on around them.

Champion, 32, supports the building moratorium and the new conservation efforts.

“I think Zephyrhills has an opportunity to learn from the mistakes of some of these other cities that lost their character to so much development,” Champion said. “Having a methodical plan for growth that gives you time to assess things like water conservation, that's smart.”