Why we support St. Pete's $600M 'storm resilience' plan | Column

St. Pete voters will see a question on the November ballot about whether they support the plan.



In 2024, Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding in St. Petersburg. [MICHAELA MULLIGAN | Tampa Bay Times]

In 2024, Hurricanes Helene and Milton hit St. Petersburg just 13 days apart. Helene brought a peak storm surge of seven feet, while Milton brought 100 mph wind gusts and 18 inches of rain. They flooded over 10,000 homes, forced a four-day citywide boil-water notice, and shut down the facilities we rely on to flush our toilets. City facilities alone sustained $113 million in permanent damage, with total recovery costs nearing $250 million. Homeowner costs were far higher with damage approximating $1.4 billion. As devastating as Helene and Milton were, future storms will be worse.

These storms remind us that most disaster impacts are determined long before the wind and water arrive. The harm inflicted by floods and hurricanes is directly tied to the plans, decisions and investments we make before nature strikes. Unlike many Florida cities, we hadn't had recent disaster experience. It had been 80 years since St. Petersburg last experienced a Category 1 hurricane, and 105 years since our last "major" hurricane. We knew we were vulnerable, and now we know what it looks like when those vulnerabilities are exposed. The costs and risks are real.

All of us rely on more than $10 billion in infrastructure that our city owns and maintains, most of it underground or out of sight. Hundreds of pumps, over 100 million gallons of storage and over 3,000 miles of pipes belong to this city's citizens. This vast system undergirds the critical public services that keep us safe and healthy, but in 2024, it fell short. So where do we go from here?

So far, the city has gradually financed upgrades through our utility bills. The total tab to maintain and upgrade our infrastructure is $4.4 billion through 2050. This includes a $2.7 billion short-list of urgent projects that will help prevent costly damage and service disruptions. These costs put tremendous pressure on the rates we pay each month and severely limit how quickly we can complete projects. Inaction isn't an option, so we now propose a bold solution: the $600 million general obligation "GO" bond referendum on your ballot. By borrowing through bonds and repaying them through property taxes, we can accelerate these upgrades without unaffordable increases to utility bills. Financing these projects this way means 88% of homeowners will pay less than if we keep relying on utility bills alone. The 12% who own the city's most expensive properties will pay more.

These investments will benefit everyone. When the next hurricane strikes — and it will — investments we make will directly correlate to our recovery costs. Projects that would take 10 years can be completed in just five. The risk of floods, sewer shutoffs and boil-water notices will be substantially lower. Recovery costs will be lower, and fewer homes and businesses will suffer catastrophic losses. The result will be fewer lives disrupted and hundreds of millions of dollars saved. That is what the return on investment looks like. "Five years faster" isn't a slogan; it means avoided costs and reduced financial risk.

Since the city introduced the referendum, we've worked overtime to respond to the public's questions with concrete actions. The city has created two citizen-led oversight bodies, a Resilience Advisory Committee and a GO Bond Advisory Committee, to build trust through transparency and accountability. The new Resilient by Nature policy requires that natural and hybrid infrastructure (like trees and living shorelines) be considered first for future projects — and evaluated against the same cost and performance standards as concrete and steel. Finally, on Nov. 12, the city's Health, Energy, Resilience and Sustainability Committee will consider, and we will urge advancement of, a proposal to create a city-wide resilience plan. We urgently need a strategic roadmap that prepares everyone for increasingly dangerous weather, because protecting critical infrastructure alone isn't enough. We must work harder and smarter to protect neighborhoods and livelihoods too.

We've both personally experienced the hardship that flooding inflicts, and we implore the voters of St. Pete to help build a future where resilience is in our city's DNA. We have the tools, but we must have the collective will to use them. Toilets that flush. Water you can drink. Streets that drain. These are the services, your services, we're asking you to vote yes for.

We discuss St. Pete's resilience in more detail on the Protect Florida podcast at sierraclub.org/protectflorida.

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