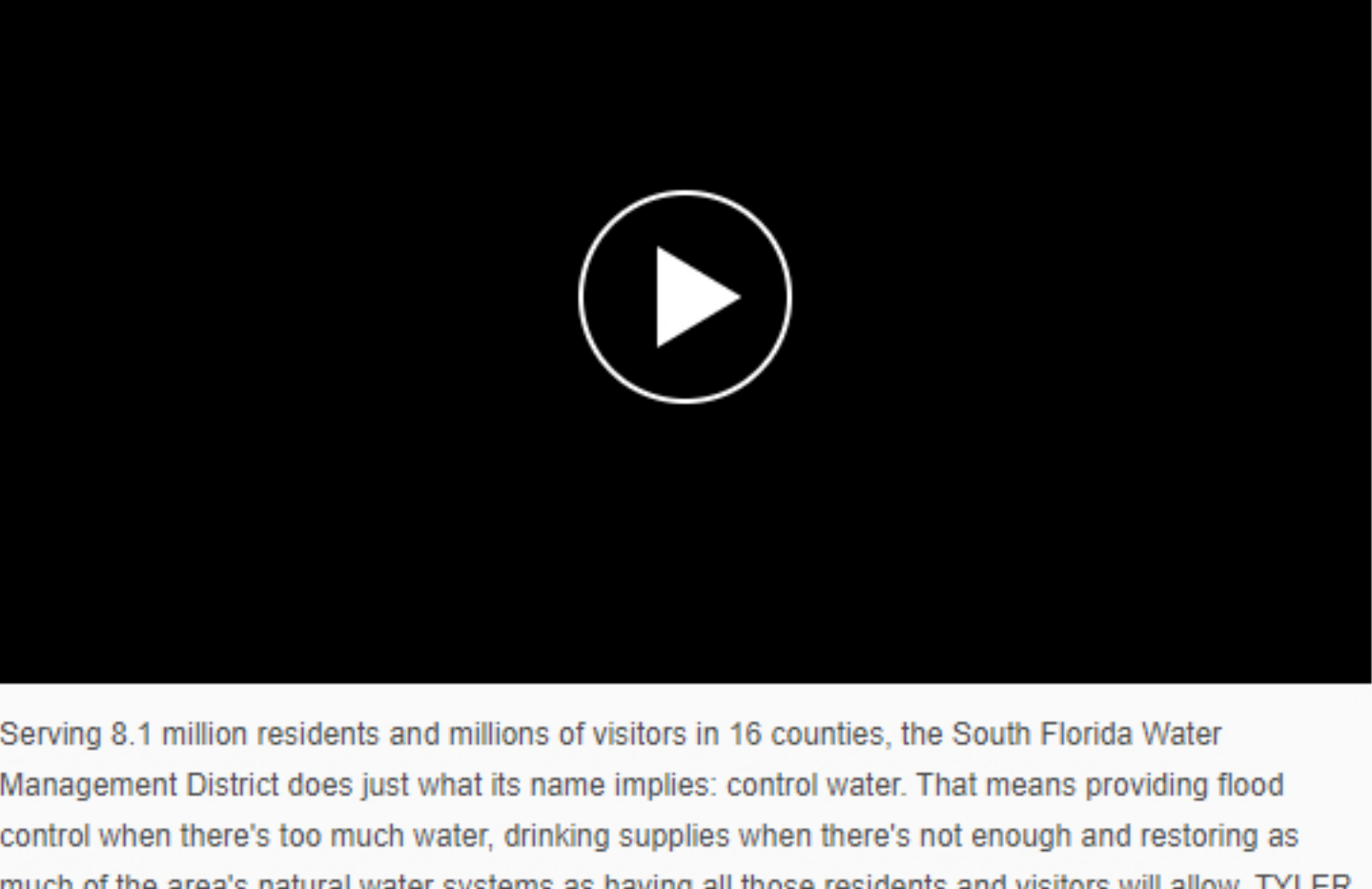


Poll: Floridians willing to pay for clean water; coalitions: here's how they should do it

Tyler Treadway, Treasure Coast Newspapers Published 5:00 p.m. ET April 18, 2020 | Updated 6:21 p.m. ET April 18, 2020



Serving 8.1 million residents and millions of visitors in 16 counties, the South Florida Water Management District does just what its name implies: control water. That means providing flood control when there's too much water, drinking supplies when there's not enough and restoring as much of the area's natural water systems as having all those residents and visitors will allow. TYLER TREADWAY/TCPALM

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Florida voters cherish clean water and are willing to pay for it.

In a recent statewide poll of registered voters, 62.4% said they'd be willing to pay an extra \$2 a month for projects to clean up Florida's waterways.

So the poll's sponsors, the [Brevard Indian River Lagoon Coalition](#) and the [Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County](#), are asking the state's five water management districts to raise their property tax rates by 0.1 mills, or 10 cents for every \$1,000 of taxable value.

That would be an extra \$18.70 a year, or \$1.56 a month, for a \$237,000 home (the median assessed value for a house in Florida) with a \$50,000 homestead exemption.

More:[Read the FAU clean water poll results](#)

With Florida's \$16 trillion real estate base, the slight tax increase would raise an estimated \$160 million a year.

Plus, the proposed property tax increase "wouldn't actually be an increase at all," said Paul Fafelita, a Vero Beach fishing guide and president of the Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County.



Each year billions of mullet make their way south along Florida's coastlines and estuaries. (Photo: SAM WOLFE/SPECIAL TO TCPALM)

For each of the last nine years — under the direction of Gov. Rick Scott for the first eight and last year under Gov. Ron DeSantis — the water management districts have "rolled back" property tax rates to a level that, considering increases in property values and new construction, would generate the same revenue as the year before.

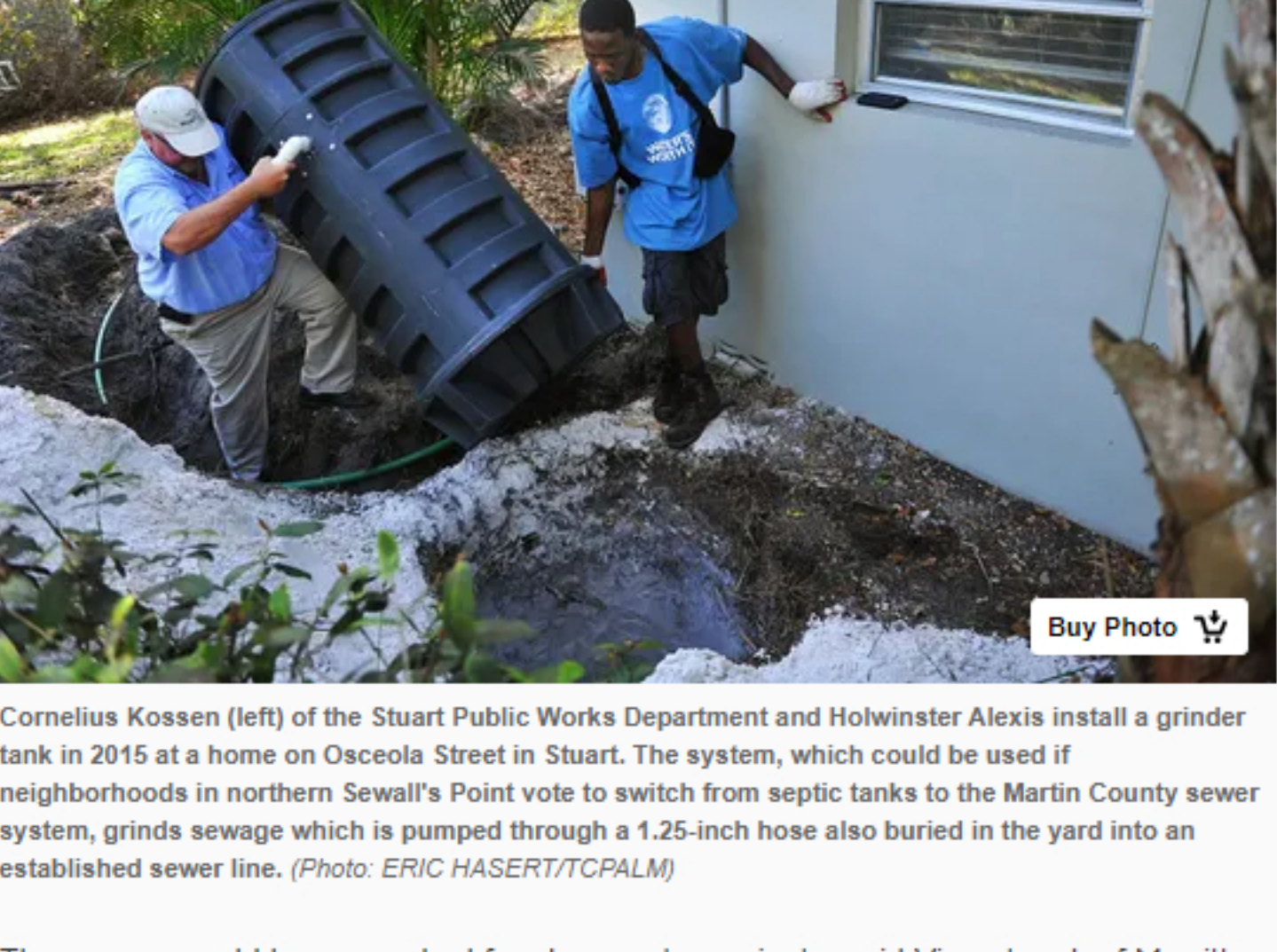
More:[Water district approved rolled-back property tax rate](#)

So instead of a tax increase, the proposal would really mean just not "rolling back" the rate so far, Fafelita said. "All we're proposing is putting back in place a very small part of the tax rate that's been taken out."

Matching funds

The coalitions suggest water management districts use the money 50 percent matches for cities and counties to implement projects to combat water pollution problems such as:

- [Septic system to sewer conversions](#)
- Upgrading sewage treatment plants
- Finding alternatives to [applying sewage sludge](#) (aka biosolids) as agriculture fertilizer



Cornelius Kossen (left) of the Stuart Public Works Department and Holwinster Alexis install a grinder tank in 2015 at a home on Osceola Street in Stuart. The system, which could be used if neighborhoods in northern Sewall's Point vote to switch from septic tanks to the Martin County sewer system, grinds sewage which is pumped through a 1.25-inch hose also buried in the yard into an established sewer line. (Photo: ERIC HASERT/TCPALM)

The money would be earmarked for clean water projects, said Vince Lamb of Merritt Island, chairman of the Brevard Indian River Lagoon Coalition, and not allowed to be part of the districts' general fund.

"I think the money can be managed better by the water districts that are actually building the project rather than putting it all in Tallahassee and letting them dole it out," said Fafelita said.

Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch, a member of the South Florida Water Management District board, said she would "absolutely look at the proposal and support it."

Although the cost to the the average homeowner would be minimal, large property owners would take a bigger hit.

A 2016 TCPalm investigation found the tax rollback approved by the South Florida Water Management District board in 2015 saved a combined \$2.1 million for 15 companies: seven hotels, three utilities, two tourist attractions, two retail stores and one sugar producer. Florida Power & Light Co. saved the most: \$531,550.

More:[Tax cut robs Everglades, saves big businesses millions of dollars](#)

Paying higher taxes "is just part of being the big businesses that they are," Fafelita said. "If you make big profits on one side, you pay some of it back on the water side."

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Politics plays a role in the water districts' decision making, Thurlow-Lippisch said, "I can't say that it doesn't. But when people come forward and say, 'We want this,' anything can happen."

Poll results

The poll conducted by the Business and Economics Polling Initiative at Florida Atlantic University surveyed 1,150 people statewide by telephone and online and has a margin of error of 2.9 percent.

The poll was conducted in early February, before the coronavirus pandemic crashed the economy with widespread unemployment and underemployment.

"Clearly, that's an issue," Lamb said.

But Lamb also noted ballot issues to raise money for environmental projects almost always have public support, even after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and during the Great Recession.

"Voters and taxpayers have always put a high value on clean water," Lamb said. "We're in a period of uncertainty now. We don't know how much the virus is going to do to stall the economy. But we think our proposal still makes enough sense to push forward with it."

Monica Escaleras, professor and director of the Business and Economics Polling Initiative, doesn't think the coronavirus changes peoples' willingness to pay more for clean water.

"The results might have been even stronger if we took the poll now," Escalares said. "More than ever, people want to be healthy, and having clean water is a big part of that."

Floridians have their limits: Only 39.9 percent would be willing to pay an extra \$4 a month on clean water projects, according to the survey.

Respondents were spread throughout the state, with more from the populous south (31%) and west central (27%) regions than the less populous northwest (12.2%), northeast (10.8%) and east central (19%) regions.

Respondents were all registered voters over 18 years old, with about half 65 or older. Politically, 43% were Democrats, 39.6% Republicans and 17.5% Independents.

According to the poll, 84% of Democrats, 79% of Republicans and 79% of independents agree or strongly agree that it is important government do more to protect Florida's waterways.

"This isn't a Republican-Democrat issue," Fafelita said. "It's a clean water issue. It's about improving health, creating jobs and protecting property values. Those are things both parties can get behind."

Clean Water Poll

More data gleaned from the statewide FAU poll conducted for clean water coalitions in Brevard and Indian River counties:

- 87% think it's very important or important to clean up Florida's waterways
- 83.7% think healthy, clean waterways are very important or important to Florida's economy and the health of its citizens

Asked if state and local governments need to do more to protect water quality in lakes, rivers, springs and estuaries:

- 81% agree or strongly agree
- 84% of Democrats agree or strongly agree
- 79% of Republicans and independents agree or strongly agree

How concerned are you about the water quality of Florida's lakes, rivers and estuaries?

- 27.5% are extremely concerned
- 33.9% are moderately concerned
- 24.4% are slightly concerned
- 14.3% are not at all concerned

Who is extremely or moderately concerned about the water quality of Florida's lakes, rivers and estuaries?

- 69% of Democrats
- 50% of Republicans
- 65% of Independents

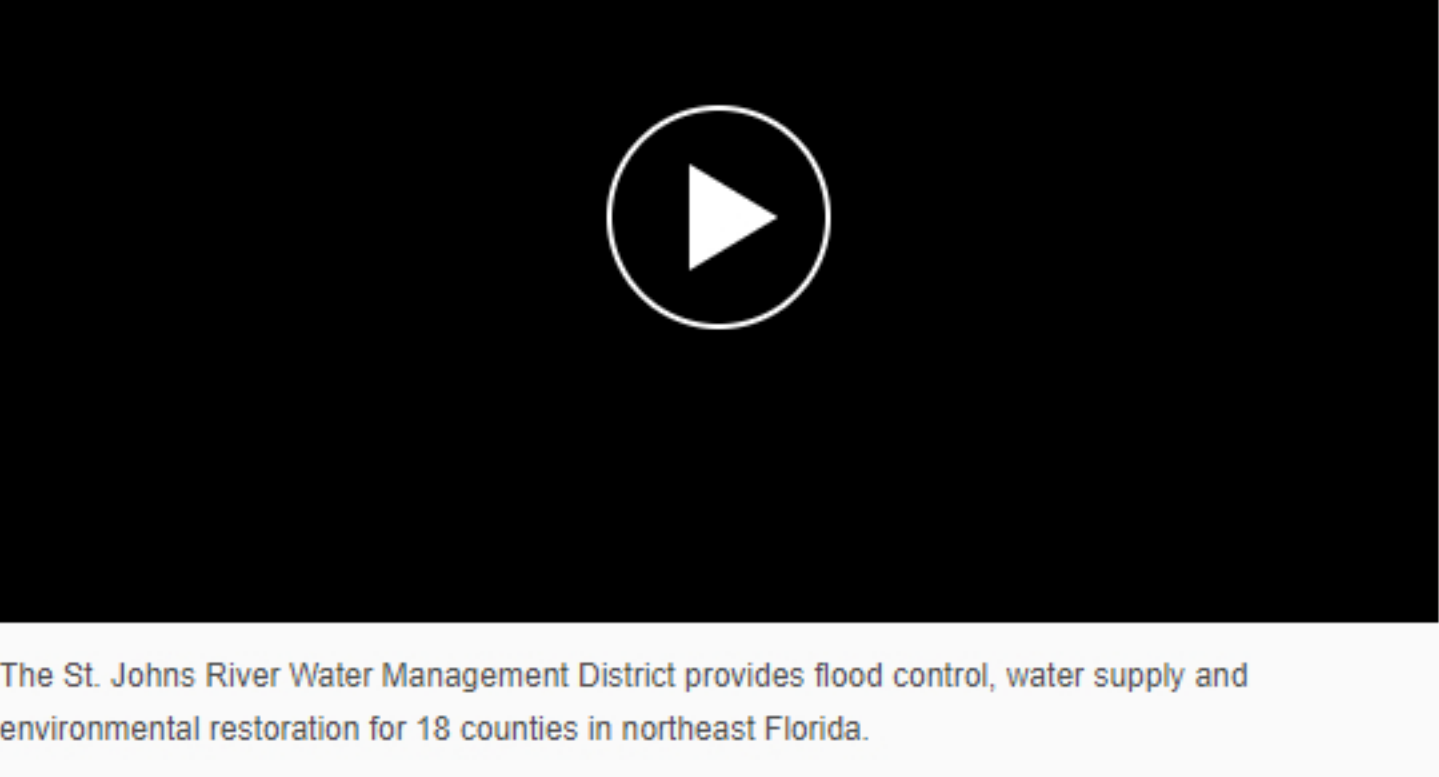
Where would the money go?

Based on taxable property values from 2018, here's how much revenue each of Florida's five water management districts would generate from a 0.1 mill addition to property taxes:

- **Northwest Florida:** \$10.2 million
- **Suwannee River:** \$1.4 million
- **St. Johns River:** \$33.9 million
- **Southwest Florida:** \$37.4 million
- **South Florida:** \$95.8 million

Source: [Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County](#)

Tyler Treadway is an environment reporter who specializes in issues facing the Indian River Lagoon. [Support his work on TCPalm.com](#). Contact him at 772-221-4219 and tyler.treadway@tcpalm.com.



The St. Johns River Water Management District provides flood control, water supply and environmental restoration for 18 counties in northeast Florida.

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