



For St. Pete's best future, it needs the Tampa Bay Rays

Our booming city may not *need* a baseball team to keep growing. With the influx of people, businesses, and investments, the numbers are going to get higher regardless – for better or for worse.

However, if the City of St. Pete wants to become its best amidst that boom, it needs the Tampa Bay Rays, and the two need to grow together. And in our opinion, the proposal assembled by the Rays and Hines is the best path forward for the two rising stars, city and franchise alike.

City and regional leaders, such as St. Petersburg Mayor Ken Welch, have referred to the redevelopment of the Historic Gas Plant District as a “generational opportunity,” and indeed it’s a particularly rare occurrence that a city of our size happens upon the opportunity to do as it pleases with 86 acres of prime real estate smack in the middle of town.

Welch and the rest of the leadership in the city (as well as throughout Pinellas County) were wise to take their time and assess all options. There are no do-overs on a project this size, and getting this one wrong could prove detrimental for the hopes of inclusivity, equity, and affordability being a part of St. Pete’s future.

Already, we have seen a seismic change in the makeup of the city, and intentional growth is key to ensuring our home can remain welcoming, competitive and accessible for those who make it so special and attractive to others.

For that to happen, these prime 86 acres must go toward what’s best for the citizens of St. Pete – while still making economic sense for those who will foot the majority of the bill. We believe the plan put together by Hines and the Tampa Bay Rays is the best choice to ensure that balance is held in place.

This plan not only keeps our hometown team in St. Pete – the only city the franchise has ever called home – but it also offers an opportunity to bridge north and south St. Pete, make good on broken promises of the past, provide *real* community investment, and deliver the area a premier destination for events and entertainment as well as affordable living and working.

Selling to the highest bidder would simply mean more towers, high-priced condos, and hotels, with more locals displaced and disenfranchised. Converting it into 86 acres of affordable housing is ultimately unrealistic, if not a noble idea. Working with Hines and the Rays on a balanced approach hopefully gives St. Pete its best-available opportunity to deliver not just for all involved parties, but all affected citizens.

While it will take the better part of two decades for the vision to come to life, each piece of the ~\$6 billion development will add an integral part to the city’s growth. From hundreds of millions being poured into affordable and workforce housing, to a modern and state-of-the-art baseball stadium, to enhanced green spaces, more avenues for the arts, and more jobs for local individuals and companies, there is virtually no segment of the St. Pete population that won’t benefit in some way.





Of course, this isn't just about St. Pete. They are, as we've discussed lately, the *Tampa Bay Rays*. Just like the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Tampa Bay Rowdies, or even Tampa Bay Times. As the Rays are part of a larger organization in Major League Baseball, so too is St. Pete part of a larger region, and we all depend on each other for growth, support, and resources.

Keeping the Rays in St. Pete is important to the city. Keeping them in Tampa Bay is a win for the entire region. And creating a marquee baseball experience for the nearly 3.5 million of us who live in the area is, pardon the pun, a home run opportunity we shouldn't pass up.

We often think of Central Avenue as the spine of St. Pete; a corridor brimming with business, life, and entertainment, connecting the east and west sides of our peninsula home. But in truth, there has also been a wall – literal, in spots – carving the city in two. With the redevelopment of the Historic Gas Plant District, we have the opportunity to take a swath of land that once severed our connection and transform it into a destination that will bridge divides and serve as the heart of St. Petersburg, pumping life into all corners of the city.

Just as the Rays began as an expansion team, so too did St. Pete at one time just seem like an extension of Tampa Bay – a waterfront resort for tourists and retirees that served as a smaller cog in a bigger machine. In the last 25 years, both have soared to new heights that few would have predicted.

As St. Petersburg and the Tampa Bay Rays continue to grow, they need each other to become their best. St. Pete stands on the precipice of something great – inclusive and equitable growth that serves all its citizens. The best way to do so, is if the Rays are truly *Here To Stay*. I Love the Burg supports Mayor Welch's decision to award this historic – and generational – redevelopment to Hines and the Tampa Bay Rays. We are better together.

Dexter Fabian
Publisher, I Love the Burg & That's So Tampa

DISCLAIMER: The Tampa Bay Rays are a community sponsor of I Love the Burg & That's So Tampa. However, we stand by the opinion stated as what's best for the city.

