

Water Management District issues 'Tara' permit amid environmental concerns

WUFT | By **Rose Schnabel**

Published May 14, 2025 at 5:28 AM EDT



WUFT
OPBS npr

Donate

Bryan Buescher (left) and University of South Florida Assistant Professor Patricia Spellman (right) survey Mill Creek Sink. Both are part of an ongoing effort to monitor water quality within the sink and its cave system. (Rose Schnabel/WUFT News)

What is typically a quiet, staff decision turned into a hour-long public discussion as the Suwannee River Water Management District considered Alachua County's objections to water permitting for a cavitop development.

At stake was an "Environmental Resource Permit": a sort of permission slip developer Sayed Moukhtara will use to show local authorities his "Tara Phoenicia" project won't harm surface waters or cause excessive flooding.

Tara Phoenicia is proposed to be a mixed commercial and residential development adjacent to U.S. Highway 441 in the City of Alachua. It's one of five interconnected "Tara" projects planned for the area which, altogether, have raised local concern because of their proximity to a prominent cave system of the Floridan Aquifer.

The district's governing board unanimously decided to issue the permit Tuesday afternoon.

Here's how that decision played out and what comes next:

1. The district had already approved a previous permit for Tara Phoenicia

The district approved an environmental resource permit for Tara Phoenicia in January 2023. The developer later revised its stormwater management system after coordination with an adjacent neighborhood fell through. The new permit serves a smaller area with a larger proportion of impervious surfaces than the previous one.

2. Speakers disagreed about how the development would affect sinkholes and water quality

"The entirety of this project site lies within an extensively fractured zone," said Alachua County Environmental Protection Department engineer Mary Szoka.

A geotechnical company contracted by the developer identified three underground anomalies within the project's limits. Szoka recommended these areas be studied further, "for future residents that are going to live there and for the future protection of our water resources in the area."

When asked by the governing board if additional testing would be informative, district engineer Sara Ferson said it wouldn't change staff's recommendation to approve the permit, "as it's not required in rule."

County staff also raised concerns about the project's impact on water quality, noting that contaminants from the development could enter residential wells and springs through the adjacent Mill Creek Sink. Cave diver Bryan Buescher said preliminary water quality testing from the sink shows nitrate levels 14-times higher than the district's goal of 0.35 mg/L.

Jay Brown, president of the project's site developer JBPro, said Tara Phoenicia's stormwater system is designed to capture and treat more runoff than local codes require. "We're not sending more water there. We're not sending it there faster," he said of the sink. "We're designing it so that it's discharging similar to pre-development conditions."

3. The board approved the new permit unanimously

By doing so, District Assistant Executive Director Tim Alexander explained, "we're not saying it's good, we're saying it's met our criteria."

4. Water permits for other sections of the project are still waiting on approval

The five portions of the development total around [580 acres](#). They're at different stages in the approval pipeline with both the water management district and the city.



"Tara" water management permits by status: approved (green) and pending (yellow). (Google Earth visualization and screen capture by Rose Schnabel/WUFT News)

Name	Water Management District permit status	City permit status
Tara Forest West	Pending	Awaiting final plat
Tara Baywood	Modification pending (initial permit issued 2/11/2022)	Under construction
Tara Forest East	Modification pending (initial permit issued 2/11/2022)	Under construction
Tara April	Issued 12/20/2022	Awaiting final plat
Tara Phoenicia	Issued 5/13/2025	Awaiting final plat

Table: Rose Schnabel/WUFT News • Source: Suwannee River Water Management District and City of Alachua • Created with Datawrapper

5. It's up to the City of Alachua to decide the project's fate

WUFT

BBC News World Service

The Alachua City Commission approved a preliminary plat that includes Tara Forest West, Tara Phoenicia and Tara April last July. [Public opposition, county involvement](#) and [planning staff resignations](#) slowed further progress.

A public hearing for the final plat hasn't been scheduled.



FLORIDA ENVIRONMENT
& AG DESK

COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM
AND COMMUNICATIONS

Tags

Environment

City of Alachua



Rose Schnabel

Rose Schnabel is WUFT's Report for America corps member, covering the agriculture, water and climate change beat in north central Florida. She can be reached by calling 352-294-6389 or emailing rschnabel@ufl.edu. [Read more about her position here](#).

[See stories by Rose Schnabel](#)

SAVE PUBLIC MEDIA



ACT NOW ➔

Latest News Headlines

Lo escuchaste en NOTICIAS WUFT, 05/24

Newberry commission halts unpermitted railroad tie operation

El refugio local se asocia con Community Staples para ayudar a los animales locales

The Point, May 23, 2025: One year later, springs restoration still stalled

In lawsuit over teen's death, judge rejects arguments that AI chatbots have free speech rights



From NPR News

Trump says he'll delay a threatened 50% tariff on the European Union until July

'I cannot believe it': Alex Palou of Spain cruises to victory at the Indianapolis 500

'I am Roman,' Pope Leo says, as he becomes the bishop of Rome

Trump again blasts Harvard over international students as judge blocks revocation

Mumbai's iconic pav bread might soon be toast



Stay Connected

WUFT-TV/FM | WJUF-FM
1200 Weimer Hall | P.O. Box 118405
Gainesville, FL 32611
(352) 392-5551

A service of the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida.

© 2025 WUFT / Division of Media Properties

About

Contact Us

WUFT Station News

Membership

WUFT
BBC News World Service

Sponsorship

Public Files and Records

WUFT FM FCC Public File
WUFT TV FCC Public File
WJUF FM FCC Public File
WUFQ FM FCC Public File
EEO Report
FCC Applications