

ST LUCIE COUNTY

Belvedere Terminals Fort Pierce fuel farm sparks public safety, water pollution concerns

Is Buc-ee's a Belvedere Terminals client? The gasoline distributor declined to say.

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Key Points

The 145-acre forested site on Glades Cut Off Road is just south of Lake Zobel in the George LeStrange Preserve.

Plans show 10 tanks that would store gasoline, propane, ethanol, diesel and jet fuel.

The petrochemicals would be transported by train from Gulf Coast refineries.

A fire, spill or explosion could pollute the air and Ten Mile Creek, which flows into the St. Lucie River and Indian River Lagoon.

A proposed fuel farm has sparked concerns about public safety and water pollution as it would be near homes, schools, churches, campgrounds, waterways and nature preserves west of Fort Pierce.

Belvedere Terminals Co. LLC plans to transport liquid petrochemicals — gasoline, propane, ethanol, diesel and jet fuel — by train from Gulf Coast refineries to a site northeast of Midway Road and Florida's Turnpike, where they would be stored in unpressurized tanks before being trucked to buyers.

"Belvedere's facility is just a commercial-sized gas station," spokesperson Marleigh Kerr said.

Belvedere plans to build a 40-foot-tall tank that would hold 94,000 barrels, two 40-foot-tall tanks that would hold 67,000 barrels, and a smaller secondary tank that would hold 51,000 barrels, COO Mike Benedetto said in a prepared statement Kerr emailed TCPalm. Plans show 10 tanks, however.

"Pre-application plans often show more tanks than intended in order to give a facility the opportunity to grow," Benedetto's statement says.

Belvedere Terminals: CEO and founder bribed public official in 1984

The 145-acre forested site on Glades Cut Off Road, just south of Lake Zobel in the George LeStrange Preserve, is in an industrial zone, but too close for comfort for some people. A fire, spill or explosion could pollute the air and Ten Mile Creek, which flows into the St. Lucie River and Indian River Lagoon.

That concerns Florida Rep. Dana Trabulsy, who lives on the St. Lucie River in nearby White City. She's also worried that across the street is where the county is relocating its South Hutchinson Island wastewater treatment plant, and where her husband works at Southern Eagle Distributing.

"Accidents happen," Trabulsy said. "If so, the surrounding infrastructure, a community and the Indian River Lagoon would be destroyed."

Public safety concerns about fuel depots

The United Nations wrote safety guidelines for fuel farms because they can lead to "devastating effects" on people and the environment. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration says they can cause fires, explosions, asphyxiation, toxicity and physical and chemical hazards.

Belvedere will comply with all regulations, Benedetto said, and its "state-of-the-art" safety plans include fire protection and stormwater ponds to prevent runoff and flooding, Kerr said.

That doesn't placate Sterling Olsen, 80, who lives in Lost Tree Estates about 1.5 miles away and is concerned about accidents and increased traffic.

"I've worked in heavy construction and seen how things can go wrong," he said.

Treasure Coast residents like Olsen may remember a 2015 fire that destroyed Viesel Fuel in Stuart. About 40,000 gallons of biodiesel, methanol and vegetable oil burned and leaked into drainage ditches. The area was evacuated, including Port Salerno Elementary School. The cleanup took weeks.

Employees were "lucky to escape serious injury or death," OSHA wrote in a \$13,000 fine for safety violations.

While Ranger Construction Industries President Bob Schafer said he has no issue with Belvedere if the company follows the rules, Southern Eagle Distributing CFO Paul Trabulsy opposes it.

“We need these places,” Trabulsy said, “but we don’t need them this close to town.”

Environmental safety concerns about fuel storage

Environmentalists are concerned about the site’s wetlands and proximity to preserves and waterways.

“It’s an accident waiting to happen,” said Shari Anker, president of the Conservation Alliance of St. Lucie County. “The St. Lucie River should be protected on principle.”

Belvedere obtained an air pollution permit in July, but has not obtained a national pollution discharge elimination system permit or an environmental resource permit that's required if wetlands and surface waters will be affected, the Department of Environmental Protection said.

Belvedere is conducting a required study to determine what type of wetlands are on the site, Kerr said. They are likely Category 1 — meaning larger than 20 acres, connected to water bodies and crucial for biodiversity — which would require a 50-foot-wide buffer from development, according to county Environmental Resources Director Amy Griffin.

Three nature preserves offer recreational activities nearby:

George LeStrange Preserve: 94 acres with a hiking trail and kayak launch for the 37-acre catch-and-release Lake Zobel

Richard E. Becker Preserve: 13 acres with a hiking trail

Sweetwater Hammock Preserve: 7 acres in the North Fork Greenway with a nature trail.

Belvedere's plans for Fort Pierce fuel terminal

The St. Petersburg company, which never has built a fuel farm, plans to invest \$750 million in 10 new fuel farms and new rail lines — starting with Jacksonville, Ormond Beach and Fort Pierce.

Belvedere cited Florida's ever-growing population and increased demand for fuel, and said its fuel farms don’t shut down in hurricanes like ports do.

Belvedere has leased the Fort Pierce land from Florida East Coast Railway, which also owns the railroad track that runs through the site that's surrounded by Waste Pro, Titan America, Diamond Fertilizer and a Walmart Distribution Center.

Belvedere submitted a pre-application in May 2022, but has not submitted a final site plan.

The Jacksonville City Council has not approved Belvedere's 14-tank fuel farm proposal, which some residents living near the site oppose. Belvedere has not submitted its plans for a 16-tank fuel farm in Volusia County, but the Ormond Beach City Council has voted against providing the necessary utilities and annexation.

"Not no, but heck no," Mayor Bill Partington said at a Sept. 20 City Commission meeting. "This city will not provide utilities for a project that is so adverse to our residents' quality of life."

A city news release cites the "close proximity to crucial community assets," including homes, a youth sports complex and "critical watersheds like the Tomoka River. The potential strain on local infrastructure, traffic and the increased demand for emergency services have also been a part of these concerns."

The fuel farm could generate 160 trucks a day, City Commissioner Susan Persis wrote.

The Volusia League of Cities board, which represents 16 municipalities, unanimously approved a resolution to fight the fuel farm.

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