

# Tampa Bay Times

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## Red Tide: No end in sight

### St. Petersburg's shoreline is ground zero, and scientists can find no sign of the bloom abating.

BY ZACHARY T. SAMPSON AND GABE STERN  
Times Staff Writers

ST. PETERSBURG — The Sunshine City and its sparkling waterfront parks have become the center of Tampa Bay's Red Tide crisis. Rafts of dead fish are washing ashore more quickly than crews can gather the carcasses. Workers have picked up 477 tons of dead fish from the coastline in recent weeks, according to Mayor Rick Kriseman. That accounts for the overwhelm-

ing majority of more than 600 tons picked up across Pinellas County. Scientists continue to detect high levels of Red Tide through much of the bay, with no sign of immediate relief on the horizon. "It's here. It's bad. And there's not much we can do other than make sure we're all communicating well," Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Director Eric Sutton told the *Tampa Bay Times*. "There's no signs that necessarily it's going to be coming

to an end soon, but I've learned enough not to try to predict Red Tide either." Sutton and Florida's interim environmental secretary, Shawn Hamilton, visited St. Petersburg on Tuesday to hold a discussion about Red Tide. Reporters were not allowed to attend. "The bay is not very happy right now, to say the least," said Robert Weisberg, a physical oceanography professor at the University of See BEACHES, 3A



IVY CEBALLO | Times

Capt. Chris Wittman, of Captains for Clean Water, speaks Tuesday at a gathering to address Red Tide at 81Bay Brewing Co. in Tampa.

### A TAMPA BAY TIMES SPECIAL REPORT



JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times

## THE NEW RECRUITS

### PART II

At St. Petersburg College's police academy, the cadets are learning to shoot moving targets, respond to 911 calls and race cop cars through a series of orange cones. In a building called the shoot house, they have to "knock and announce," then clear rooms where "bad guys" wait with guns. They use fake bullets, but the dangers they are about to face are becoming more real. Reporter Lane DeGregory and photographer John Pendygraft spent six months at St. Petersburg College's police academy, following three cadets on their path to the thin blue line.

SPECIAL SECTION INSIDE

## Gaming law fills political coffers

Companies bet \$62M ahead of a change that limits contributions to ballot initiatives.

BY ANA CEBALLOS AND MARY ELLEN KLAS  
Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — Spurred by a massive gambling deal for the Seminole Tribe of Florida, three out-of-state gaming giants — Las Vegas Sands, FanDuel and DraftKings — have put \$37 million into what appears to be an effort to front load multiple ballot efforts to influence the future of sports betting and casino gambling in Florida. A fourth company, owner of Florida-based Magic City Casino, has created a political committee called People Against Regulatory Legislation Addressing You (PARLAY) in June and gave it \$15 million for purposes yet to be determined. And the Seminole Tribe, in an effort to counter measures that could undermine its gambling deal with the state, has injected \$10 million into a political committee, Voters in Control Inc., to influence issues on the 2022 ballot. The sudden dump of nearly \$62 million in political contributions from a single industry is an See GAMING, 5A

## Reshaped by pandemic, worship still evolving

At Greater Mount Zion AME Church in St. Petersburg, services like this one on Sunday attract many worshippers but still not as many as before the pandemic.



DIVYA KUMAR | Times

As parishioners carefully trickle back into the pews, churches are keeping virtual options open.

BY DIVYA KUMAR  
Times Staff Writer

The Rev. Pablo Diaz was five Sundays into being the new transitional pastor at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Dunedin when much of the world came to a halt last year. Stay-at-home orders were put

in place and Diaz, like many other religious leaders across the country, had to get creative. It took a while getting used to talking to a camera, he said. And though people sent emails saying they liked the recorded sermons he gave or livestreamed on Facebook and YouTube, it was different

not having anyone in front of him. "Hopefully the words I had given could reach the heart, lift the soul and renew the mind," he said. "You have to make some adjustments." But as much of normal life resumes, people are slowly coming back for in-person services, which the church has offered since October. A Pew Research survey from March found that about 75 percent of adults in the United States See CHURCHES, 3A

### SENIOR HOME FINED OVER CARE

A health inspector says Watermark at Trinity, an assisted living facility, failed to isolate three residents with the coronavirus and must pay \$10,500. **Local, 1B**

### ITALIAN BUSINESS TO BUY WELBILT

A \$3.5 billion offer appears to have won the bidding war for the New Port Richey restaurant and professional kitchen equipment supplier. **Business, 5B**

### LINEUP TO SHIFT, BUT HOPE STAYS

Time, contracts and the salary cap are about to have a big effect on the Lightning roster, but that does not rule out next year's team being a Cup contender. **Sports, 1C**

### STEP UP YOUR PICNIC GAME

Have you been dreaming of the perfect picnic? With the help of some local experts, wishes can come true. You won't even have to clean up afterward. **Taste, 1E**

### Afternoon thunder

8 a.m. Noon 4 p.m. 8 p.m.  
79° 87° 85° 82°

60% chance of rain  
More, back page of Sports  
Vol. 137 No. 355  
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## BEACHES continued from 1A

South Florida, whose lab forecasts the movement of Red Tide. His model, relying on water sampling from the state, suggests the toxic algae will stick around for the foreseeable future.

Weisberg said the bloom could, in fact, linger even longer — perhaps into the fall, which is a more normal season for a Red Tide bloom to drift in from offshore.

“The prognosis is not all that good,” he said.

A patchy bloom that revealed itself in early June when small pinfish and grunt turned up dead on Pinellas’ beaches has since sunk unnervingly into one of Florida’s — and the country’s — most treasured estuaries. Pinellas has reported some water samples in Tampa Bay with levels of Ride Tide 10 to 17 times greater than the concentration considered “high.”

Snook and tarpon have floated dead in the bay. Carcasses decayed Tuesday in the sun, gray and reeking, at Maximo Park near the Sunshine Skyway and Bay Vista Park across Pinellas Point. They piled like snowdrifts beside upturned shells of horseshoe crabs at Lassing Park in the Old Southeast.

“You name it, it’s washing up right now,” said Tampa Bay Estuary Program Assistant Director Maya Burke.

Red Tide more typically shows up in the Gulf of Mexico, she said, like it did during a persistent bloom in 2018. To see high levels in the bay is “really, really, really uncommon.”

“Unfortunately, I think it could be pretty uncomfortable for a long time,” Burke said.

Blooms consist of microscopic organisms that produce fish-killing toxins. They may cause people to suffer minor breathing trouble, a scratchy throat and watery eyes. County monitoring has shown elevated levels of Red Tide off several beaches in recent days, including Fort De Soto, Pass-a-Grille, Treasure Island, Madeira Beach, Indian Rocks Beach and Clearwater Beach.

A bloom was drifting far south of Tampa Bay earlier this year, Weisberg said, around Charlotte Harbor. Unusually persistent southerly winds between March and April may have moved those organisms up to Tampa Bay, he said. Once here, the Red Tide organisms likely met with recycled nutrients, particularly nitrogen, dumped into Tampa Bay in April through contaminated water from the old Piney Point fertilizer plant site in Manatee County, according to Weisberg.

“If you give it the right suite of nutrients, the concentrations can escalate very rapidly,” he said.

Scientists have not proven



Photos by IVY CEBALLO | Times

**From left, Vahan Takoushian, Andrew Martinez and Zahira Lehri of Southeastern Fishing Tackle listen to a speaker address the Red Tide crisis on Tuesday during a gathering at 81Bay Brewing Co. in Tampa.**

definitively that the bloom is feasting upon contamination from Piney Point, and Burke said they may never find a “smoking gun.” But they know that putting nutrients into the bay generally causes algae to grow.

“That’s textbook what we’re seeing right now,” Burke said. “We have no reason not to link those two things together.”

The forces that end a Red Tide bloom are still a “mystery,” according to Weisberg, but he said the standard circulation of the bay is not likely to flush out algae soon. Dead fish compound the problem because the carcasses release more nutrients back into the water to feed Red Tide. Burke said that is part of why local efforts to remove dead fish from the water are so important.

The city stationed dumpsters in several parks so residents could throw away any dead, stinking fish they collected from canals and at the foot of seawalls.

Lori Johnson walked her Lhasa apso, Griffin, on a sidewalk by one bin in Flora Wylie Park. She had smelled rotting fish from her ninth-floor condo the night before and on her daily walks watched as fish floated north from Vinoy Park

to Snell Isle. Workers clad in high-lighter yellow scooped dead animals from the water.

“They were from 22nd to 28th, just lined up with trucks and men, just digging it out,” Johnson said.

A crew near Snell Isle Boulevard that morning loaded dead fish into garbage bags, hauling the load away in city pickups.

Two environmental groups, Captains for Clean Water and Tampa Bay Waterkeeper, hosted a listening session later Tuesday at a brewery in South Tampa to hear from fishing guides about the problem. It was one of three meetings they planned that day.

Daniel Andrews, co-founder of Captains for Clean Water, told the *Times* that he has heard from charter operators logging cancellations because of Red Tide. He shared a story of captains bringing clients north to Crystal River for clear fishing. The state’s most recent monitoring shows high levels of Red Tide to the south of Tampa Bay as well, off Longboat Key and Sarasota.

Andrews, from Fort Myers, said his area suffered the brunt of the last bad Red Tide from 2017 to 2019. Fishermen there still cannot keep some species, includ-



**Derek Edwards, co-owner of Fresh Catch Coffee in St. Petersburg, also attends the meeting at 81Bay Brewing Co.**

ing redfish and snook, because of a partial closure following the bloom. State regulators reopened those same fisheries while in season in Tampa Bay only this spring, because it was not hit as hard. During the 2017-19 crisis, Pinellas removed more than 1,800 tons of dead marine life.

Captains and guides, Andrews said, are some of the first people hurt when visitors delay trips because of Red Tide. They also

suffer long-term if toxic algae kill off mature keeper fish, depleting overall stocks.

“It’s not something that goes away as soon as the Red Tide does,” he said.

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## CHURCHES continued from 1A

who attend religious services felt comfortable going back to church. Religious leaders around Tampa Bay have seen a similar return to their services.

Still, Diaz wonders what the future holds. Other Pew studies have documented that fewer than half of Americans belong to a house of worship, a statistic that was on the decline before the pandemic.

“What we don’t know yet is the impact that this pandemic has on the life of any church,” Diaz said. “What kind of habits and routines did we create around spirituality that comes out of necessity because of the pandemic that will shape the future of spirituality? That is yet to be seen, and it’s too early to know.”

He posed still more questions: “Where are we going to be a year or two years or three years from now? Did it draw us closer to each other and closer to God? Did we redefine it and find that in some ways we can stay at home and have our own spiritual experience?”

At Christ the King Catholic Church in Tampa, the Rev. Len Plazewski said attendance has been close to normal since after Easter. The parish transitioned to livestreaming during the pandemic, but has kept one service available through livestreaming since May 22. That’s when the Diocese of St. Petersburg restored the general obligation to attend Mass, allowing an exception for parishioners still unable to come or who feel uncomfortable coming for health reasons.

“As Catholics there is no substitute for Sunday Mass and to receive the Eucharist,” Plazewski said.

Teresa Peterson, spokeswoman for the diocese, said that while concrete numbers are not yet available, she has heard anecdotally that around 80 percent of churchgoers have returned since the diocese lifted the general dispensation from going to Mass.

Last Sunday during a late morning service at the Cathedral of St. Jude the Apostle, pews were mostly filled, with some gaps between parishioners. People exchanged blessings of peace at a distance, with a wave or peace sign.

The Rev. Ralph D’Elia, parochial vicar at the cathedral, said he could tell that people were sad about not being able to see their fellow parishioners. The church has brought back doughnuts and coffee after Mass and people have been staying.

“It’s been beautiful to see people coming back together,” he said. “I sense people have been longing for a sense of community.”

As at Christ the King, one cathedral service still is livestreamed for those who cannot attend in person. Plazewski said the pandemic revealed that weddings and funerals could be livestreamed as well, even in non-pandemic times, when some are unable to be physically present.

“This is one of those once-in-a-generational kind of things,” he said.

Some churches have taken a slower approach to reopening. At the Mount Carmel Baptist Church in Clearwater, services are still virtual and they are preparing to return to in-person services within a few weeks.

Shirley Mainer, missions director and church secretary, said the approach has largely been due to the fact that their congregation is older. Instead, she said, they’ve focused on making sure their members are connected with faith and information. Worshipers are kept up to date with federal guidelines and offered transportation to testing sites, vaccinations and food services.

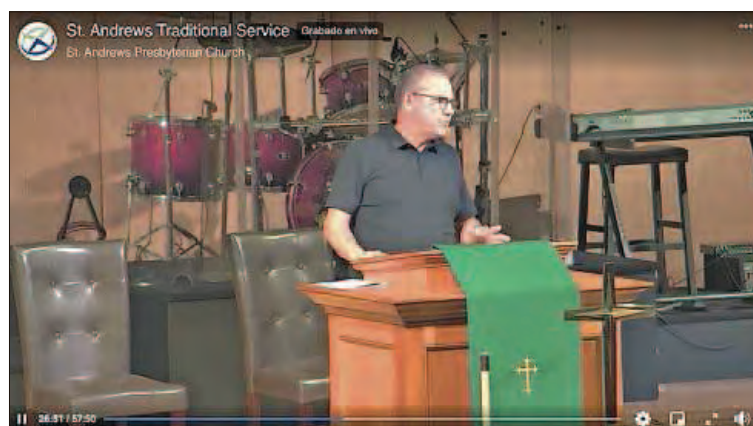
“The building itself is not the primary thing,” Mainer said. “The faith is what we stand on.”

Still, the Rev. Clarence Williams of the Greater Mount Zion AME Church in St. Petersburg said there’s something about stepping into a church that can’t be replicated, though it may be a little dif-



MARTHA ASENCIO RHINE | Times

**Kathy Demeza works to prepare the church for Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent at Cathedral of St. Jude the Apostles in February. In May, the Diocese of St. Petersburg lifted its dispensation from the Sunday Mass obligation for most parishioners.**



**The Rev. Pablo Diaz delivers his weekly sermon via Facebook Live, an option that remains available since the church has reopened.**

ferent.

Last Sunday, parishioners came through the door, stopping first in front of a digital thermometer. Masks requirements remain in place, stickers on the floor remind people to stay 6 feet apart and in-person attendance was a little more than 100 people. Before the pandemic, 300 to 400 attended each week, Williams said.

“Some things probably won’t ever be the same,” he said. “Now that you have more people engaged, you still have that mind-

set of keeping everyone safe while still bringing them the word of God. ... This thing is something that’s personal. You’re going to have to allow people to get back to their comfort level.”

The sounds from the choir and musicians reverberated differently through the room from how they did through the livestream. The tithing box stood for contributions, but CashApp and PayPal were other options.

Williams said that while it upset him not to be there in per-

son for members of his congregation during baptisms, funerals and weddings, transitioning to virtual services has not been all bad. The church now sees more than double the number of people engaging with its services online.

Williams doesn’t see it as a threat to the in-person experience, but a change that fits the times.

“We live in a society where people’s lifestyles are very fluid,” he said. “Especially when people may not have the time or the logistics may not favor going to an actual worship service in person.”

Diaz said he, too, thinks people will attend in person if given a choice. What his congregation members said they missed most was hugging one another.

“Faith is very tangible,” Diaz said. “It’s displayed in the ways we love and care for one another, and even in the simple things of hugging, shaking hands, smiling to each other. ... If there’s anything we’ve learned through this process, it’s the people. The people is what matters.”

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