

City of Tampa, Florida Downtown Walking Tour

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The Built Environment MSMGT750_SU21_SEC02

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27 June 2021

Area Stroll Observations

Downtown Area Layout.

Tampa's Downtown area is orientated around a stretch of the Hillsborough River, which shares its name with the surrounding Hillsborough County. Along this river is an Arts and Entertainment district. See the left side of Figure 1 to locate the river. East of the river and the Arts district are the multi-purpose buildings occupied by a vast array of businesses. With its wide variety of places to eat, education centers in the form of art and historical museums, outdoor recreation space, and annual festivals, Tampa attracts families and individuals of all ages to its downtown streets.

Outside the downtown area, many residential neighborhoods are growing. There is a noticeable difference between the commerce of the city hub and the surrounding suburbs. While Tampa's downtown area and the areas immediately surrounding it such as Ybor City directly to the east have a strong connection with transportation and closely constructed businesses and residential buildings, the suburbs are less sustainably planned.

Over time, however, the city of Tampa has been condensing and becoming more of a welcoming place for both residents and visitors. What used to be a very industrial area is now proudly covered by much more green space and community culture sharing hubs.

Pedestrian egress.

The waterfront of Hillsborough River which weaves through Downtown Tampa used to be an industrial area, but the area has become very walkable due to the growth of mixed-use developments and residential buildings surrounding the water (Steele, 2020). A bicycle enthusiast or practical commuter is able to bike throughout the city using the Coast Bike Share Program, which offers subscriptions as well as pay-as-you-go deals (Visit Tampa Bay, 2021). Downtown crosswalks allow ample time for a pedestrian to make it to the other side of the street, and the space between the street and the sidewalks are often separated by a grassy or planter area and trees, giving the pedestrian a sense of space and comfort.

Ease of Access

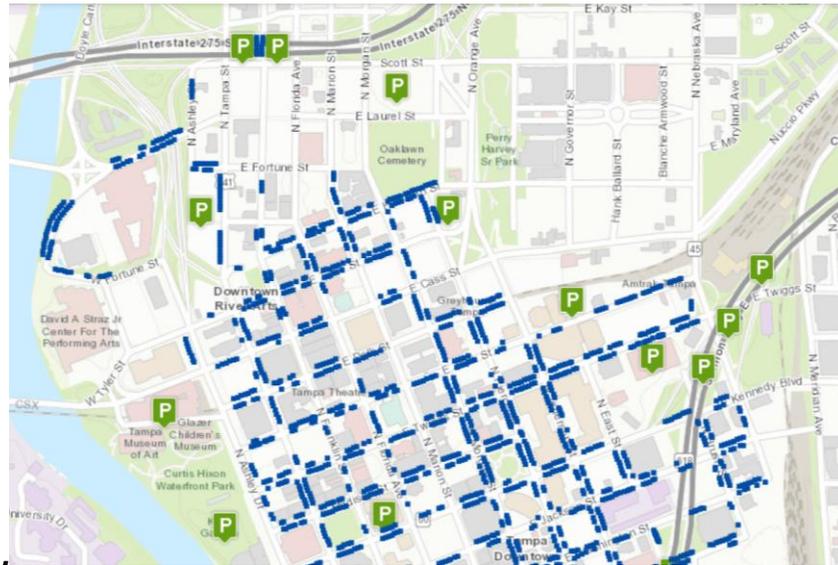


Figure 1. City of Tampa Parking Locations (City of Tampa, 2021)

As can be interpreted by Figure 1, the city of Tampa is accessible by two major highways. This is important, because the public transportation and pedestrian and biker friendliness only extends a bit outside the downtown limits. Therefore, most commuters from farther away from the downtown area and visitors are vehicle owners. The city understands this, and has placed ample parking for these drivers around the city. Parking is represented by the blue dots and green downward arrows on the map in Figure 1. Also helpful for these commuters is the water taxi system, which runs up and down the pictured Hillsborough River.

Public transportation and driveability.



Figure 2. Streetcar to Ybor City (Tampa Bay and Company, 2021)

There is a streetcar system in place called the TECO line, which connects Downtown Tampa to the adjacent bustling areas of Channel District and Ybor City. The system stretches 2.7 miles, and can connect residents and visitors to important places in town such as the Tampa Bay History Center, the Tampa Convention Center, the Florida Aquarium, and the Amalie Arena (City of Tampa, 2020). The city selected streetcars as its method of public transit due to the cars' ability to hold a high capacity of passengers, and their accessibility to persons with disabilities via wide doors and easy onboarding (City of Tampa, 2020). See Figure 2.

The City of Tampa is now planning a modernization and extension project for the existing streetcar system, which would lengthen its current route by 1.3 miles (See the bold purple line on the west side of the map in Figure 3). The project would include the updating and maintenance of existing vehicles as well as updates to the traction power system (City of Tampa, 2020). When updating its streetcar system, the city will be sure to include amenities for accessibility, such as seating, overhead protection, wastebins, signage and information maps, and ADA-compliant access ramps (City of Tampa, 2020).

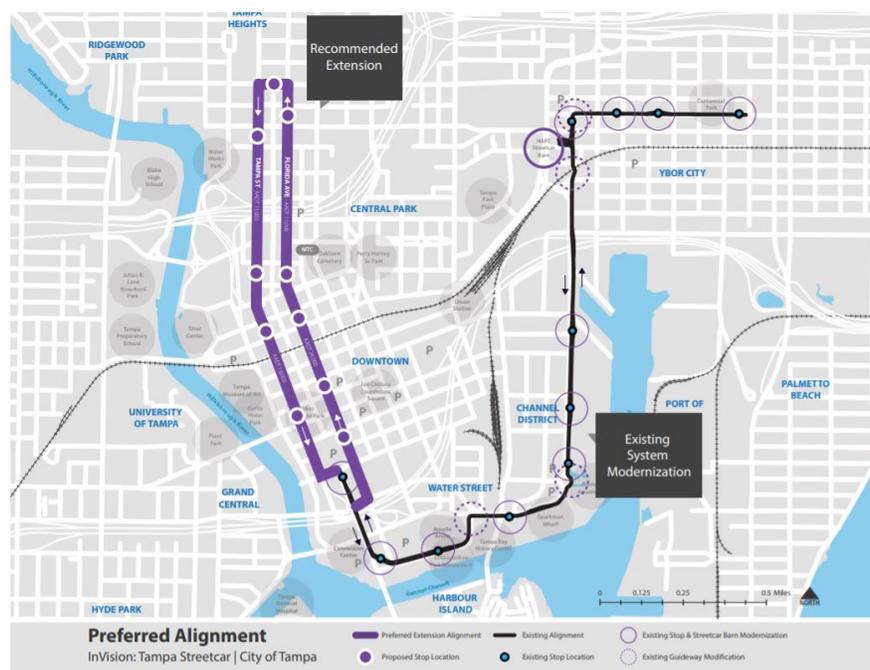


Figure 3. Tampa Streetcar Project Overview, August 2019 (City of Tampa, 2020).

Local Merchant Vibrancy.

The city hub is home to 35 different food options, primarily American cuisine. Even in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tampa has welcomed eight new restaurant establishments, half of which are primarily considered bars (Visit Tampa Bay, 2021). Tampa hosts multiple craft breweries and distilleries, including Coppertail Brewing Co. and Cigar City Cider and Mead, which can both be found just outside the downtown area in Ybor City.

Tampa bay has recently become a tech industry hub by hosting Tech Data, a Fortune 500 competitor, as well as Raymond James, a leading provider for financial services. These companies allow the city to be a commerce hub as well as a place for families and tourists (McClure 2020).

Special activity areas.

Just a streetcar ride or short drive away is Ybor City, a historically Cuban area with a bustling nightlife. Ybor City used to be a neighborhood dominated by cigar trade and manufacturing, and now it is known for authentic Cuban experiences in addition to an array of breweries, bars, and clubs. Yearly, the city even hosts a flan bake-off to celebrate its dessert tradition (Visit Tampa Bay, 2021).

As a pedestrian makes their way down the Downtown Tampa Riverwalk which borders the Hillsborough River, they are surrounded by myriad arts and entertainment options over the walk's nearly two miles. Figure 4 shows the beauty of the lights installed on the Tampa Riverwalk. On the river itself, for recreation, people can paddleboard, BiYak (bike meets kayak), or hop on a Kraken CycleBoat for relaxing yet rewarding food and drinks (Visit Tampa Bay, 2021).



Figure 4. Tampa Riverwalk At Night (City of Tampa, 2021)

Annually in March, Tampa hosts the Gasparilla Festival of Arts (See Figure 5). The festival takes place at the Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park, and hosts more than 300 artists of every media imaginable. (Tampa Bay and Company, 2021).



Figure 5. Gasparilla Festival of the Arts at the Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park (Tampa Bay and Company, 2021).

Along the Riverwalk you can encounter the Tampa Museum of Art, whose building was awarded an American Architecture Award in 2011 (See Figure 6). The museum is home to permanent and touring exhibits, many of which celebrate local artists (Tampa Bay and Company, 2021).

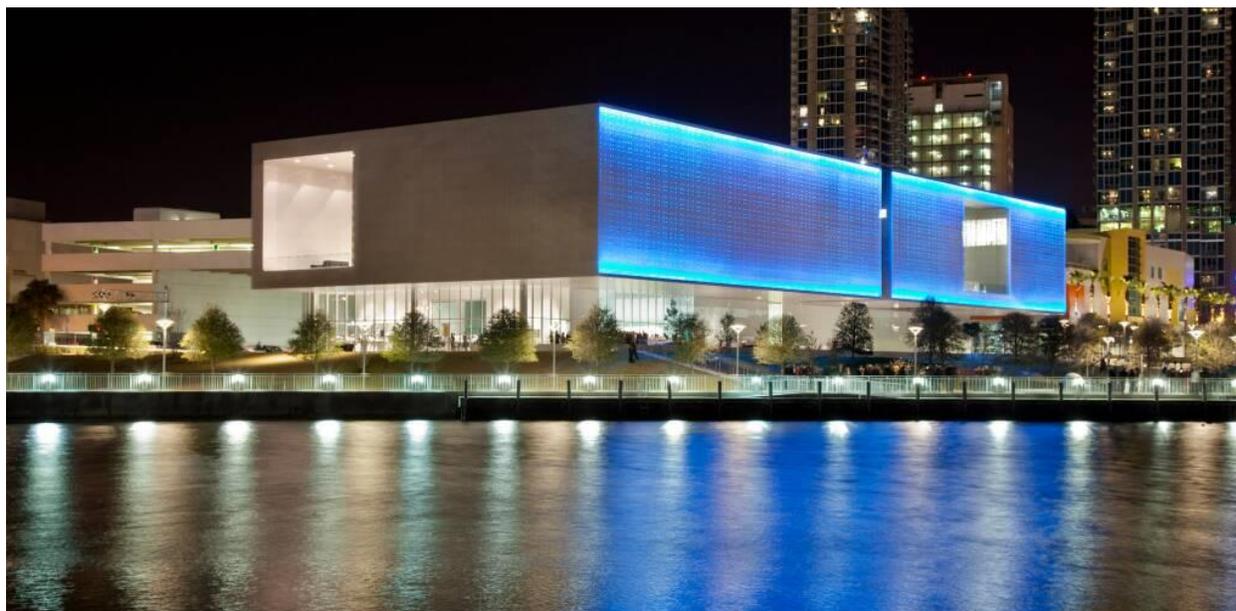


Figure 6. Tampa Museum of Art (Tampa Bay and Company, 2021).

The Riverwalk is also home to the Glazer Children’s Museum which boasts a number of hands-on activities to invoke wonder (Tampa Bay and Company, 2021). Families can visit museum and then cool off in fountains that children are able to run through in order to have fun and cool off, at the Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park. The park is a perfect place to bring a picnic or a book, for those not visiting with children.

Across the river is the University of Tampa, whose historical building is an important architectural addition to the river landscape. The building has several towering, shining minarets. The Straz Center for Performing Arts is close by, where one can view several resident and traveling companies. Current resident companies include the Florida Orchestra and Jobsite Theatre. At varying times of the year, visitors can even see opera, musicals, jazz performances,

or dance shows. At the Tampa Bay History Center, patrons can learn about the people who shaped the city to be what it is today.

State of the Area.

Downtown Tampa is safe in the daytime and in the evening. The colorful lighting installed along the Riverwalk and in Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park make the area more welcoming and safe after sunset. Not many businesses are still open in the late evening hours, but visitors of the Sheraton hotel at the South end of the Riverwalk can be seen relaxing in the hotel's outdoor pool and bar space. Just south of the Sheraton is the University of South Florida's Downtown campus, adding to the safety of the area.

With the number of museums the city boasts and the number of architecture awards it possesses, it is safe to say that Tampa is a city that supports art expression. Figures 7 and 8 display murals that can be found downtown and in the surrounding neighborhoods, livening up the city and adding color and culture to its streets.

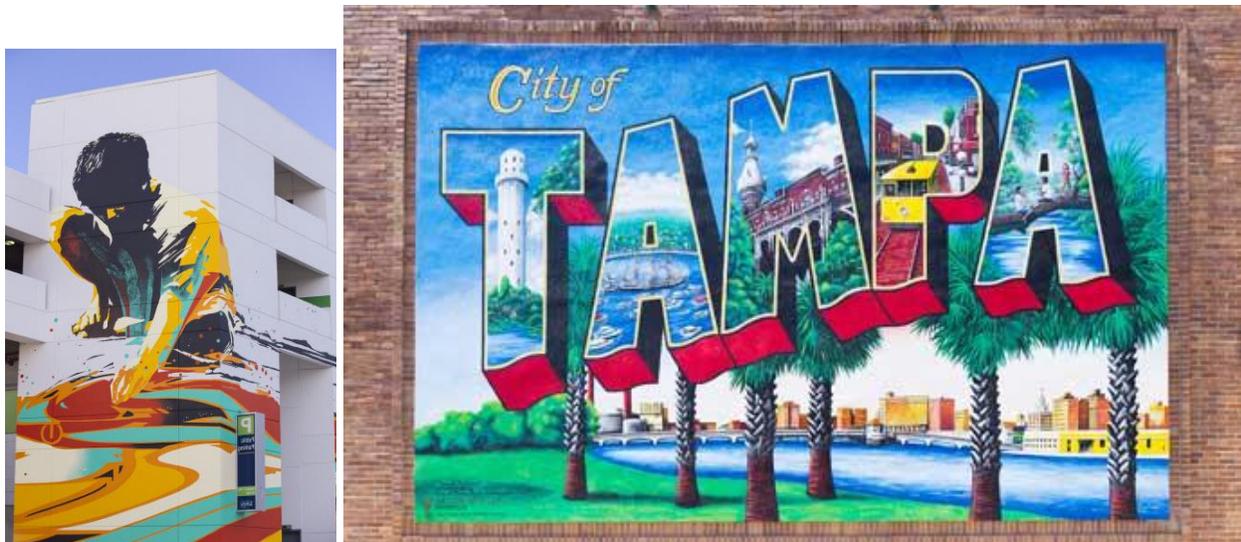


Figure 7. Left: *Stay Curious* by Tes One and Bask, located near the Art Museum and Children's Museum in downtown Tampa. Right: *City of Tampa* by Carl Cowden (Visit Tampa Bay, 2021).



Figure 8. Left: *Cuscaden, Past, Present, and Future* by Allen Leper Hampton. Located in Cuscaden Park and commissioned by the City of Tampa. Right: Coppertail Brewing Co. Mural by Evan B. Harris (Visit Tampa Bay, 2021).

Overall Sustainability

In 2020, Tampa elected Mayor Jane Castor. Castor has been a major advocate for combating climate change in the area, creating a position for a Sustainability and Resiliency Officer for the first time in Tampa history. She also formed a Sustainability and Resiliency Advisory Team, made up of 18 community members. On the docket is a greenhouse gas inventory process for local operations, a logical and efficient first step towards pinpointing large threats (Perry, 2020).

Revitalization Efforts.

As mentioned before while discussing Tampa's streetcar extension project, the city is focused on implementing improvements to transportation and accessibility. Times are changing and electric vehicles are going to be the norm in the not-too-distant future. Besides the plethora of aforementioned parking availability, the city welcomes electric vehicle owners. At five different stations around the city, commuters and visitors have access to 240-volt or 120-volt plug-in at electric car charging stations. These stations were actually built in 2012 through a U.S. Department of Energy grant (Hillsborough County Florida, n.d.).

Pollution, Energy, and Waste.

Around the 1960's, it was recognized that the Tampa Bay region was experiencing signs of degradation. That realization led to community action groups in the 1970's, and institutionalization of their goals in the 1980's when the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council started logging the Future of Tampa Bay Report. The report specified direct acts of pollution reduction and habitat restoration (Tampa Bay Estuary Program, n.d.).

In 1991, the EPA labeled Tampa Bay an "estuary of national significance." Congruently, Tampa formed the Tampa Bay National Estuary Program to try to put specific goals on the conservation of the land and water life. The program aims to protect fisheries and wildlife, reducing contaminant levels in the water, and educating the public on how to sustain and appreciate the land. Due to this diligence, in 2014, Tampa Bay reported a successful recovery of 38,000 acres of lost seagrass populations (Tampa Bay Estuary Program, n.d.).

On the energy front, policymakers in Tampa are expected to discuss the possibility of establishing goals to reduce fossil fuels in the foreseeable future, which would add them to the list of 11 other Florida cities also considering new measures (Perry, 2020). From 2003 to today, Hillsborough County has reduced their CO2 emissions by 120,000 tons. They have achieved this number by utilizing recycled materials efficiently in new buildings, installing solar panels on local facilities, and implementing LED traffic signals, to name a few strategies. What is more, these advances in sustainability have saved the county \$3.5 million per year (Hillsborough County Florida, 2020). The Tampa city council in 2019 allocated \$3 billion to a program they call PIPES, which stands for Progressive Infrastructure Planning to Ensure Sustainability (Perry, 2020).

Regarding green buildings in the Tampa area, six government buildings in Hillsborough county were awarded an EPA Energy Star certification. Two of the buildings were the County Center, and the University Community Resource Center (Hillsborough County Florida, 2020). In the Greater Tampa Area, there are a few buildings which boast LEED certifications. The Plant City Courthouse earned the title in 2011 for its recycled construction materials, efficient

plumbing, and energy saving lighting to name a few features. Another is the Tampa Bay History Center, which was awarded a Silver LEED certification in 2012. It takes pride in its landscaping designed for water efficiency, biodegradable flooring, and paving made up of recycled bricks (Hillsborough County Florida, 2020).

Ecosystem Considerations.

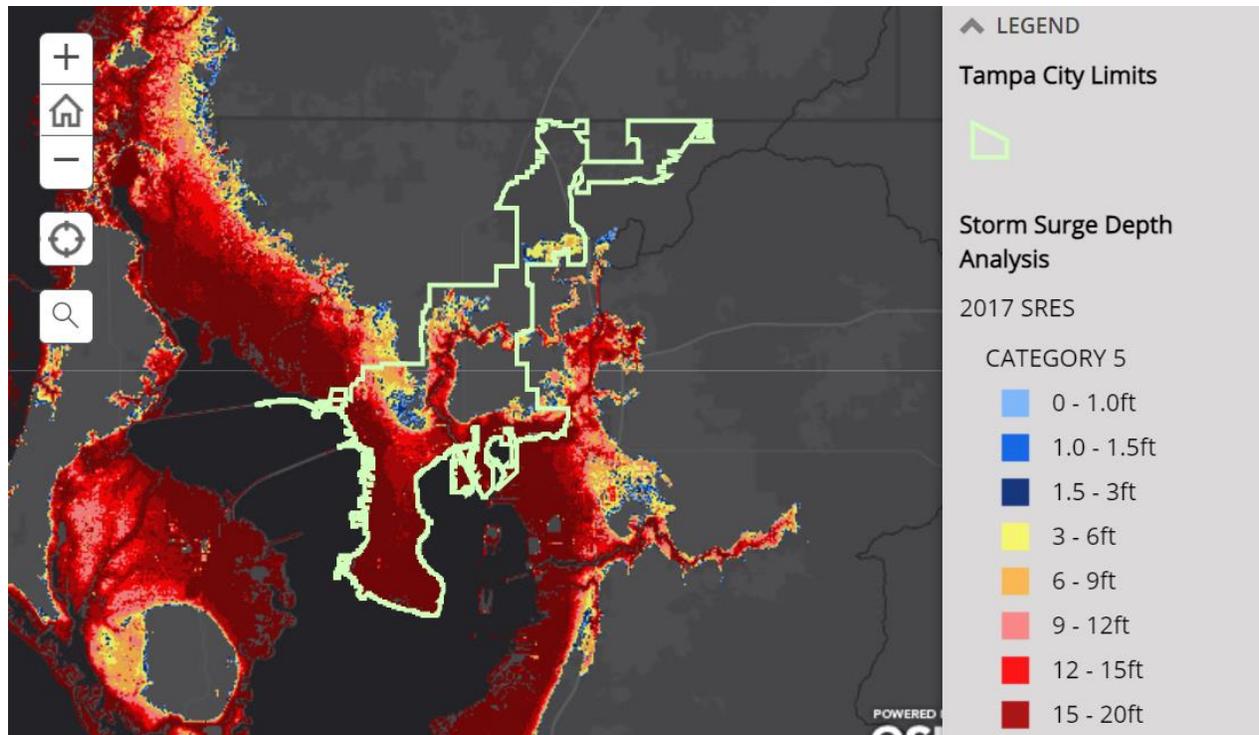


Figure 9. Flooding Prediction Map (Office of Emergency Management, 2020)

Florida is a place subject to frequent flooding events. Often, drainage systems are not strong enough to withstand the amount of water the area receives. Figure 9 shows the dangers that flooding brings to the area, emphasizing its potential for impact in the dark red areas. Flooding is a major concern especially during Hurricane season, which takes place from June to November (Office of Emergency Management, 2020).

Additionally, Tampa Bay has been dubbed “Sinkhole Alley” due to 66% of documented sinkhole damages in Florida tying back to either Hillsborough county, or surrounding Hernando and Pasco counties. Figure 10 identifies the concerning amount of reported sinkholes in Tampa

and the surrounding area. The purple area on the map represents the most vulnerable sinkhole locations, where sinkholes can appear with little warning and be of large or small size. The yellow area on the map covers less vulnerable land, where sinkholes are typically gradual, slow, and shallow (Office of Emergency Management, 2020).

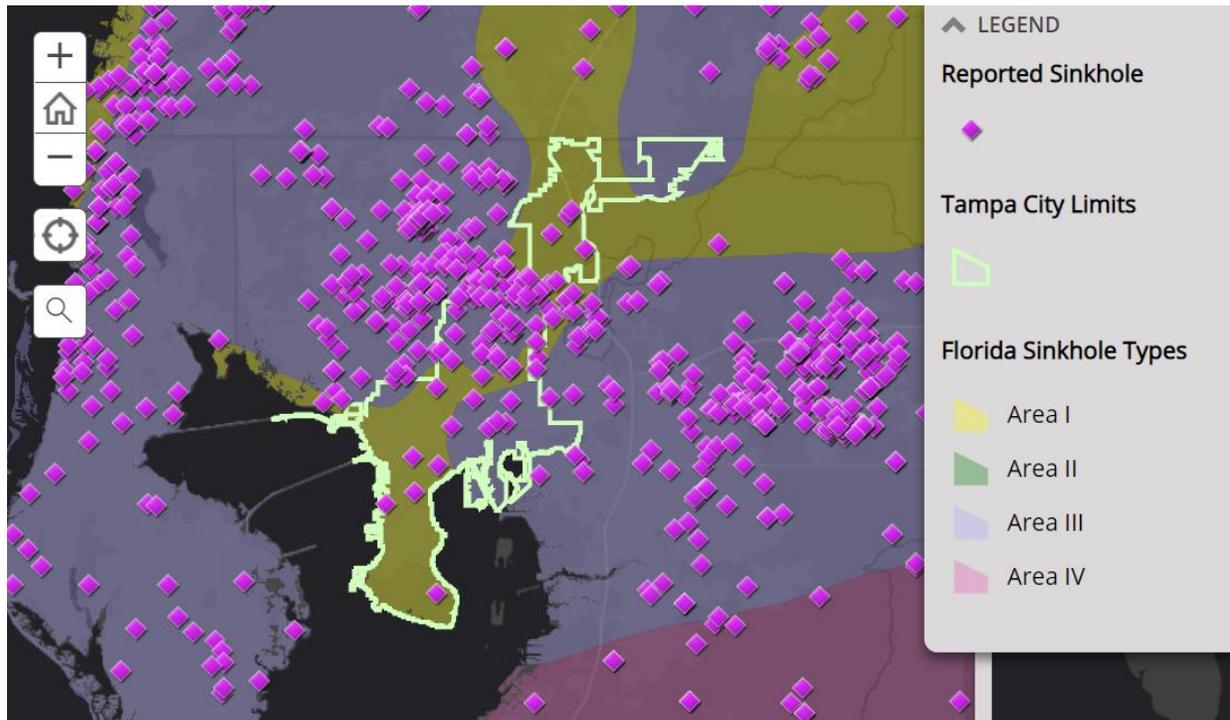


Figure 10. Sinkhole Tracking Map (Office of Emergency Management, 2020)

To help manage the issue of waste, a Recyclable Materials Processing Facility (RMPF) is soon to be proposed by the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) of Hillsborough County. The county is responsible for nearly 60,000 tons of recyclable material annually, including only areas of the county who partake in the Residential Single Stream Recycling Program. However, the population in Hillsborough County is growing by about 1.5% to 2% per year and the county's waste management must address that growth (Waste 360, 2021).

Justice and Equity.

The previously mentioned Tampa Sustainability and Resiliency Advisory Team has been paying attention to the impact that climate change and local environmental policy have on

frontline communities. According to team member Walter Smith, “This is very, very serious....This is an opportunity for us to change the face of Tampa for real by looking at these communities and working with the people of our frontline communities to make that big difference” (Perry, 2020). Recognizing that frontline communities are challenged so greatly by climate change is imperative especially in the Gulf South, because of the area’s history of petroleum processing, and in turn its recent history of the BP Gulf oil spill, which was detrimental to many low-income communities relying on businesses on the Gulf waterfront.

The Chair of the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis for Tampa government, Kathy Castor, also recognizes the impact of climate change on low income communities by voicing her goals to “pay special attention to the neighborhoods and people who are bearing the brunt of extreme heat and pollution” (Perry, 2020).

Also, the city of Tampa takes pride in its treatment of LGBTQ residents. The city takes the issue so seriously, in fact, that it earned a score of 100% in the Human Right’s Campaign’s Municipal Equality Index. This honor reflects the city’s support of the LGBTQ community in its policymaking. Tampa does not allow discrimination due to sexual orientation or gender identity in the fields of housing, employment, or public accommodations, and offers transgender inclusive health care (Snipe, 2020).

Unfortunately, 40% of families in Hillsborough County—equating to about 200,000—spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs. This is not considered affordable. According to the Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality, “104,540 families (20%) in Hillsborough pay 50% or more on housing; and 74,531 of these families have incomes at 50% and below the Area Median Income (AMI), which is about \$32,000 for a family of four” (2021). In 2019, the HOPE Affordable Housing Act was passed, which requires at least \$10 million in public funds to be allocated yearly to the cause of creating and protecting

affordable housing in Hillsborough county (Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality, 2021).

Tampa and the surrounding neighborhoods encompassed by Hillsborough county are gradually taking steps toward becoming a more resilient, accessible, and culturally rich environment. They are allocating funds to protecting wildlife, taking care of low income residents, improving energy efficient infrastructure, among other noble causes. It is exciting to predict what new developments may be in Tampa's future.

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