

# A tale of two polls: Voters support Rays stadium project

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A recent scientific poll conducted by Pathfinder Opinion Research found voters overwhelmingly support keeping the Tampa Bay Rays in St. Petersburg. Photo: City of St. Petersburg.

A public opinion poll commissioned by the [Tampa Bay Rays](#) found St. Petersburg and Pinellas County residents overwhelming support plans to build the team a new ballpark.

Columbia, South Carolina-based [Pathfinder Opinion Research](#) surveyed 492 active municipal voters and 500 of their county counterparts between March 13 and 19. Results were consistent regardless of location and [political affiliation](#). Like most professional franchises, the Rays have conducted public sentiment polls for over 10 years.

After hearing a “brief description” of the team’s current lease at Tropicana Field, 78% of St. Petersburg residents believe it is “important” to [keep the team in the city](#) for “several decades.” That number increased to 82% among county voters.

That was a recurring trend among the separate, physical memorandums marked “confidential” and obtained by the *Catalyst*. Support was slightly higher among county respondents in nearly each of the nine categories.

Before hearing any agreement details, about two-thirds of respondents favored a public-private partnership between the Rays, city and county to build a new \$1.3 billion ballpark. About 30% – just 24% in Pinellas – opposed the idea.

Pathfinder received similar results in each county commission district. The poll also found that 67% of Pinellas Democrats, 65% of Republicans and 59% favored local governments completing a stadium deal.

Those results varied slightly inside city limits, with 65% of St. Petersburg Republicans, 64% of Democrats and 61% of independents offering their approval. The national independent research firm also found that additional information increased support.

Approval rates spiked to over 80% when Pathfinder told voters that [no property taxes](#) or new assessments would fund the project and that the Rays would commit to a 30-year lease. Support increased to 88% (county) and 83% (city) when participants realized that the ballpark “will be an active community asset on non-game days.”

“We are pleased with the results and believe they are a reflection of the wide support for the franchise, as we have become part of the fabric of our community for more than 25 years,” said Rays president Brian Auld in a prepared statement.

### **Differing conclusions**

Pathfinder’s results refute a widely circulated survey released in February by the League of Women Voters of the St. Petersburg Area. It utilized the online platform SurveyMonkey and asked participants if they agreed or disagreed with statements like, “The city and the county should negotiate a better deal than the current term sheet that costs taxpayers \$1.9 billion.”

While nearly 69% strongly agreed, the emailed survey also noted that neither governing body has approved a deal. It did not mention how the League determined that cost; the city has not publicly released any final documents.

Over 72% expressed concern that spending \$700 million in property taxes on a stadium would impede the city’s ability to borrow money during a natural disaster. Local officials have repeatedly stressed that they would not allocate property taxes – or draw from general funds – to subsidize the project.

Pathfinder’s survey explained that the Rays would cover over half of the stadium costs, at least \$700 million, and any overruns. City and county officials have capped their contribution at \$600 million.

The two governments will split the public subsidy nearly evenly, with the city utilizing tax-exempt bonds and the county drawing from bed tax coffers restricted to tourism development projects. After hearing the funding plan, about 75% of respondents were more likely to [strongly disagree that the area](#) “would be better off letting the Rays leave and figuring out a use for the Tropicana Field site after the team’s lease expires in 2027.”



A site plan of the \$6.5 billion redevelopment project. Photo of provided rendering by Mark Parker.

About 780 people responded to the League’s 36,641 emails – over 200 less than the Pathfinder poll. The Pew Research Center, when conducting national polls, typically recruits around 1,500 respondents to increase accuracy.

Pathfinder’s margin of error was plus or minus 4.4 percentage points. The League’s survey did not provide those statistics. In addition, 18% of participants stated they were unaware of their municipal district when asked, the highest response rate.

The nonprofit said it was not “holding this out as a scientific poll, but it is an important indication that St. Petersburg residents have widespread concern and skepticism about this proposed use of vast public resources” in its survey announcement. “The League supports the redevelopment of the Historic Gas Plant in accordance with the city’s promise of attainable housing, equitable business opportunities, office space ... and impactful economic development that benefits all, especially those who were impacted by the original development of this land to build a stadium.”

**Other notable statistics**

The Pathfinder poll found that nearly two-thirds of county and city respondents are less likely to vote for a representative who opposes the stadium deal. The St. Petersburg City Council could offer [its approval in June](#), and elections are in November.

The survey found that nearly 60% of residents believe their quality of life would decrease without the Rays. Over three-quarters of St. Petersburg voters view the team as “[integral to the city’s economy](#) and cultural identity.”

About two-thirds of respondents named affordable housing their top priority for the \$6.5 billion Gas Plant redevelopment. Senior residences, healthcare services and shops and restaurants followed in descending order. Just 5% of city and 4% of county residents said additional office space was a primary concern.