

Local governments press state on TABOR, Amendment 4

By The News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE — Local government officials brought their legislative wish-lists to a Senate panel on Tuesday, urging members to avoid revenue caps on cities and counties and relax restrictions on electioneering so they can join the fight against Hometown Democracy's Amendment 4.

Referencing the Magna Carta and evoking images of Thomas Jefferson, the Florida League of Cities and the Florida Association of Counties outlined a series of priorities for the 2010 Legislative session to members of the Senate Community Affairs Committee.

With budget concerns atop their respective lists, both groups called on lawmakers to refrain from setting hard caps on local governments' ability to raise and spend money as they wrestle with legislative mandates, falling property values and a generally weak economy.

The revenue cap, sometimes called the Taxpayers Bill of Rights, has been pushed by some fiscally conservative lawmakers who want to place tighter controls on the ability of cities and counties to raise money.

"We'd like folks to give us a little time to see how that will play out," said John Wayne Smith, legislative director for the Florida Association of Counties.

They also called on lawmakers to clarify and potentially relax an electioneering law passed last year that prevents local governments from using taxpayer money to finance public relations campaigns on public policy issues.

Citing the upcoming vote on Amendment 4, which would require voters to approve changes to local comprehensive plans, Tallahassee Mayor John Marks said electioneering restrictions make it nearly impossible to inform voters of the potential impacts of the amendment, which is opposed by the League of Cities.

"We know what the Amendment does," said Marks, president of the League of Cities. "We will not be able to do our job if this amendment passes. I know it's well intended but it will completely hamstring local government." But Marks and other cities may not be able to spend taxpayer dollars to argue against it.

Likewise, FAC's John Wayne Smith, asked lawmakers to "clarify" what he said were ambiguities in S.B. 216, which was passed by lawmakers during the 2009 session. The law prohibits a local government from expending, and a person or group from accepting, public funds for a political advertisement or electioneering communication concerning an issue, referendum, or amendment that is subject to a local vote.

"We'd like to be part of the coalition to defeat Hometown Democracy," Smith told the panel.

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