

Proposed state amendment criticized

By TOM GERMOND

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CLEARWATER – A proposed state constitutional amendment pertaining to local governments’ growth plans has serious consequences for the state, said a leading opponent of the measure.

Ryan Houck, executive director of Floridians for Smarter Growth, said Jan. 14 that no issue on the ballot “has the potential to more suddenly and more permanently derail economic growth and prosperity and, most importantly, the prospects of recovery in our state than Amendment 4.”

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Houck said the amendment would allow referendums on any changes to local governments’ comprehensive plans for growth. He was speaking at a breakfast meeting at the Sheraton Sand Key Resort attended by 200 business leaders.

“There are no exceptions for schools, public parks, community centers, hospitals or what not,” he said. “Under this proposal, anything and everything goes to the ballot and there are a lot of very serious consequences for us at a time when we’re trying to mount an economic recovery in Florida.”

Road construction requires changes to capital improvement plans that would trigger referendums. Even small issues such as plans to install traffic signals and the purchase of municipal vehicles would go before the voters, he said.

Last year, about 10,000 changes were made to local comprehensive plans in Florida. Residents would be voting hundreds of times on local land use changes simply to keep businesses moving, he said.

St. Pete Beach is the first community in Florida to approve a local version of

Amendment 4. Residents were told that the idea was simple, he said, that it just gives people a say on growth.

"That's not what this amendment does, that's not what it is designed to do and that's not what was accomplished in St. Pete Beach," Houck said.

The city had expansive plans for revitalization efforts in the city's core historic downtown district.

"After an adoption of a local version of Amendment 4, they tossed out the old comprehensive plan and replaced it with a new one. But after that replacement, the City Council was powerless to effect even common sense progress in their community," Houck said.

Houck said that St. Pete Beach is a beautiful town but there are parts of it that desperately need revitalization, which includes Corey Avenue. Redevelopment projects have been halted since 2004 due to the "toxic political environment created by Amendment 4 in St. Pete Beach." Consequently, he said, there will be a lot more litigation in the future of St. Pete Beach.

If Amendment 4 is adopted on Nov. 2, most good projects that was proposed by private interests or local governments would die on the drawing board because the planning and the political campaigns required to change the comprehensive plans would become almost impossible to carry out, Houck said.

Florida Hometown Democracy, which calls itself a nonpartisan grassroots group, sponsors the proposed amendment.

The organization contends on its Web site that "rising taxes, dwindling water supplies and Florida's disappearing beauty are some of the devastating consequences caused by Florida politicians' habit of rubber-stamping speculative plan changes."

The Web site said "that the amendment will clean up the corrupt local politics of growth. Developers will no longer be able to buy off a simple majority of a city or county commission with their campaign IOU's." The organization argues strongly that the amendment will not require a vote on every land use change, only comprehensive plan changes that concern future land development.

Susan MacManus, a political analyst, said at the end of the meeting that, at this time, because voters are angry at elected officials, "I wouldn't say (Amendment 4) isn't going to pass."

The event, called Focus on 2010: A Tampa Bay Economic Forecast, was hosted by the Largo/Mid-Pinellas Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Largo Library Foundation.

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