

Our Voice: Let's avoid California's problems

An amendment giving voters the right of final approval on changes to municipal comprehensive plans will appear on the 2010 Florida ballot.

Most cities and towns require such a plan in order to regulate the development of infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, homes and businesses. Changes to the plan may be made only by majority vote of the town's governing body.

But opponents of what they refer to as "unplanned growth" say that's not good enough, and have managed enough support to place Amendment 4 on the ballot. They worry that real-estate developers, among others, will be able to ram through changes to the Comprehensive Plan by lobbying a small group of officials. Amendment 4 (requiring voter approval) is designed to prevent such lobbying. Supporters say that, as long as developers adhere to the plan, they have nothing to worry about. Opponents say that changing even small details in order to facilitate badly needed projects hamstrings their ability to provide needed community projects in a timely fashion. Many business leaders feel that approval of Amendment 4 would lead, ultimately, to a loss of jobs in an economy that can hardly afford to lose more.

For that reason, and many others, we feel Amendment 4 is a bad idea.

Cities and towns across Florida would be required to hold special elections each time a change, however minor, is proposed to the Comprehensive Plan. Floridians for Smarter Growth points out that had Amendment 4 been in place in 2006, the voters of Carrabelle, a small community in Franklin County, would have encountered 617 separate questions in a single ballot.

Much more significant, however, is the lesson all of America should have learned from the disastrous results of California's system of propositions -- which, in many cases, has required voter approval for individual state expenditures. So that, for example, approval could be given for the construction of a bridge, but not for the higher taxes needed to pay for it. As a result, California is effectively bankrupt.

But the most important question to consider is this: America's system of representative government gives voters the power to select those officials who will act for them in matters of governance. Our population is far too large to expect, or permit, individual voters or blocs of voters to approve every idea that comes before their elected officials. Besides, most voters just want to know how to drive the car, not how to fix the timing belt.

The whole point of representative government is to streamline government, rather than to submerge it beneath a morass of individual complaints.

We reject Amendment 4 as unnecessary and potentially harmful to the common good.

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