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New Voices: A tale of two cities: With, without Amend. 4

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A Tale of Two Cities, the classic written by Charles Dickens, begins: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

This line has been used in pop culture over the decades to describe everything from bittersweet farewells to over-the-hill birthdays.

Yet it has never seemed clearer that Dickens presciently wrote of a tale of two cities: one, Florida cities without Hometown Democracy, and two, Florida cities with Hometown Democracy.



Hometown Democracy is the misleading euphemism for Amendment 4 on this year's ballot that will take land-use decisions out of the hands of elected commissioners and put them into the public's hands at large.

Here's a hypothetical look at what life could be like in Orlando if Florida voters turn down Hometown Democracy, and if they pass it.

Orlando without Hometown Democracy would welcome new residents who come for the jobs created in health care, transportation and hospitality, because details of new developments, which matter to no one but those choosing to live in them, do not become subject to the whims of special interests in political campaigns.

As a result, when a change occurs in a community or the need for a new neighborhood becomes clear, the land-use plan can simply be altered without the vicissitudes of campaigns. In Orlando's terms, this means that the new health-research facilities around Lake Nona, the SunRail development and the hotel industry do not have to worry about where to house employees' families as the economy grows. Watchful representatives of the public work with the private sector to facilitate this.

Surely, this would be Orlando in the best of times.

With Hometown Democracy, developments would be subject to the whims of those who have zero economic interest in them. Campaigns would be hijacked by advocacy groups from Washington and California. This means that Orlando would not grow with the times; it would not diversify based on how the federal, state and local economies grow through technological improvements and change through trade patterns.

Rather, Orlando would be unable to compete to lure the best investments and projects that the world's greatest entrepreneurs have to offer. Investors from Miami, New York or even Shanghai would be hard-pressed to put their money in an area where their bold plans could be overturned by special interest-funded campaigns solely concerned with sending Florida's economy back to the Stone Age.

Indeed, this would be Orlando in the worst of times.

Ultimately, how this tale of two cities turns out depends on a choice we have to make about property rights. Will we continue to look at the historical record and realize that allowing our elected officials to make considered changes has helped Florida grow smartly?

As Terry Delahunty, a real-estate and land-use attorney in Orlando, wrote on July 3 in the Orlando Business Journal, "Florida is now the nationwide leader in land stewardship and regulation."

Or will we knowingly forsake the record to please the whims of the few?

Indeed, Hometown Democracy is little more in substance than a con perpetuated by people who want to stymie the healthy development of the state. They never learned one of the important developments in 20th-century economics, as articulated by Nobel Prize-winning economist Ronald Coase: So long as property rights can go to those who most value them, we will have an environmentally friendly, smart-growth state.

A Tale of Two Cities ends with the protagonist nobly walking to his execution. Like

him, we can submit to our own morbid ends — by voting for Hometown Democracy.

But our end will not be as noble as his, for we will not have saved anyone. Rather, we will have chosen to make a worse Florida, with unchecked growth in some areas, choked growth in others and moderation in none.

Stagnation or new life? The choice is ours.

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