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Debate rages on Hometown Democracy amendment

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DAYTONA BEACH -- Florida voters are still more than a year away from an election showdown about how to manage the state's growth.

But opponents are gearing up to try to defeat a proposed constitutional amendment, known as Florida Hometown Democracy, which would allow the public to make many major development decisions.

Dozens of Volusia County businesspeople and government officials gathered Friday to hear presentations about the ballot proposal, which one critic called a "no-growth initiative."

"I think it will be a mistake (if Hometown Democracy passes)," Volusia County Chair Frank Bruno said during a break in the meeting, which he helped moderate. "I think it will affect our economy. It will affect jobs. It will affect proper development in the future. It will be planning done by campaigning."

The Hometown Democracy proposal, which will appear on the November 2010 ballot as Amendment 4, likely will ignite one of the biggest campaign fights of next year's elections.

The proposed constitutional amendment, if passed, would allow voters to cast ballots on future changes to local comprehensive growth-management plans -- blueprints that guide development in cities and counties. Hometown Democracy would effectively give the public veto power over development issues that are decided by government officials.

Ross Burnaman, a Tallahassee lawyer who is one of the leaders of the Hometown Democracy effort, called arguments that it would hurt the economy "specious." He said hundreds of thousands of homes and millions of square feet of commercial space are vacant, and large amounts of other property have already been approved for development.

"Let's face it," said Burnaman, who was invited but did not attend Friday's meeting. "Florida presently is drastically overbuilt."

The meeting, sponsored by the Volusia League of Cities, The Chamber, Daytona Beach/Halifax Area and the Volusia County Association for Responsible Development, featured a panel discussion that included a regional planning official, two lawyers, a longtime environmental leader and the head of a group spearheading opposition to the amendment.

Panelists said Hometown Democracy would create an unwieldy development approval process that could hurt efforts to attract businesses to the state. Also, they said it could touch off public relations and advertising fights about local growth issues.

Ryan Houck, executive director of the opposition group, Floridians for Smarter Growth, called Amendment 4 a "sledgehammer solution" and said the state needs to devise strategies to manage growth, not send the issues to election ballots.

"That's not planning," Houck said. "That's politics."

Hometown Democracy supporters, however, argue elected officials across the state are too closely tied to builders and developers.

The proposed amendment has drawn mixed reactions from environmental groups. Charles Lee, a longtime Audubon of Florida leader who appeared on the panel Friday, said his group has remained neutral on the proposal.

Lee said he thought in the past he would oppose Hometown Democracy but now is not sure how he will vote. He began to reconsider the issue after state lawmakers this year made changes that environmentalists say weakened growth-management laws.

Lee said he thinks the Legislature has "lost its credibility to govern on this issue" and could unintentionally push people to support Hometown Democracy.

"I believe they have poisoned the well," Lee said.

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More about the amendment:

- For: [Florida Hometown Democracy](#)
- Against: [Floridians For Smarter Growth](#)

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