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## Cape panel hears about Hometown amendment

### Citizens would vote on planning matters

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Years of frustration with unchecked urban sprawl have a faction of Florida homeowners looking to yank decision making from local legislators.

A statewide fight is brewing over the Hometown Democracy Amendment, which would have the public vote on dozens of land-use changes every year.

In a precursor to the battle, Cape Coral's Planning and Zoning Commission on Wednesday heard from planners with the Bonita Springs firm Land Planning Solutions on the effects of the amendment.

The plan, which is on the November 2010 election ballot, would have voters decide on every change to the state's comprehensive plan.

In Cape Coral that would mean voters would have decided this year on changes to the Zemel property, dozens of commercial centers along Skyline Boulevard and a slate of esoteric changes to traffic regulations in the Community Redevelopment Agency.

In some municipalities, the number of changes could number in the hundreds.

Opponents say it would destroy future development, eliminate jobs and turn elections into logistical nightmares.

"This is idiocy and we ought to do what we can ... to see that it can't happen," said James McCord, a member of the Cape Coral Planning and Zoning Commission.

But supporters say the current system doesn't work either.

Resident Russ Moody, who was in the audience Wednesday, wasn't convinced the proposal was as bleak as planners Allison Megrath and Alexis Crespo suggested.

"The system is broken," Moody said. "Something needs to be done. There's been no alternatives (to Hometown Democracy) suggested."

Megrath argued that residents now have a say in development - should they choose to exercise it. State law requires a series of public hearings on any land-use changes and accepts input from residents on all issues. Elected officials also make decisions on changes. But after a decade of bad decisions, Cape Coral Planning Commission member Walter Fluegel pointed out, voters are frustrated.

"I think this is an expression of frustration toward the process," Fluegel said. "I understand the frustration that's behind this."

But the unintended consequences from the proposal, Fluegel added, amount to some "major flaws."

The commission Wednesday had no unified position on the amendment, but plans to take a vote. If the 8-member board votes against it later, the group would be one of hundreds of government bodies, trade associations and chambers of commerce opposing the amendment.

In 2006, St. Pete Beach passed a local version of hometown democracy, requiring voter approval for all land use plan changes.

The former mayor of the 10,000-resident town deemed it a catastrophic failure.

"Public planning has been replaced with political infighting and a parade of unintended consequences has ensued," Ward Friszolowski wrote in a 2008 letter to Treasure Coast newspapers. "I can only begin to imagine the kind of chaos Hometown Democracy would cause if it were ever forced onto every community in Florida."

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