

The town that saved Florida

By **THE PALM BEACH POST**

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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If Floridians approve a constitutional amendment on the November 2010 ballot, local voters would have to vote on every change to a city or county comprehensive plan — the blueprint for development — no matter how innocuous. Ballots would be full of items that have little impact on, and make little sense to, the average voter. Here's one such item:

The Palm Beach County Commission adopted it Thursday — without a public referendum. The staff description says that the change would revise the comprehensive plan's "Future Land Use Element and Introduction & Administration Element" to "eliminate references to the Central Western Communities Sector Plan in the text and the Special Planning Areas Map, LU 3.1."

"This is a housekeeping amendment," county staff wrote, with "no policy implications ... as the board has previously made the decision to no longer pursue a sector plan for this area." Would voters believe that? Would the jargon befuddle them? Would they bother to vote? It wouldn't matter. The proposed Florida Hometown Democracy amendment would require referendums on even the most inconsequential changes.

Fortunately, one town has been a test case for what Florida Hometown Democracy would inflict on the entire state. St. Pete Beach, home to about 10,000 people, sits on a Gulf Coast barrier island in Pinellas County. In 2006, voters approved their version of Hometown Democracy, with votes required for every comprehensive plan change. On Nov. 3, voters scaled back that approach. They limited what must go before voters to matters that "affect density or intensity of land uses, building heights or additions to or changes to land-use categories." That's a sensible revision that backers of Hometown Democracy refused to embrace because they don't believe that any change to a growth plan could be harmless.

St. Pete Beach City Manager Mike Bonfield bemoans the vote-on-everything approach. It meant putting before voters a five-year capital improvement plan that contained no local projects or local spending. Yet 25 percent of the voters, Mr. Bonfield said, rejected it.

Developers led the charge to narrow St. Pete Beach's version of Hometown Democracy. It passed by 491 votes out of 2,455 cast. Campaign money played a role, but the developers were smart enough to offer a compromise that had some teeth in it. Did the developers slip something over on voters? Are there still controversial growth proposals beyond height and density that merit consideration? The change helps landowners who already have desirable density rights but puts those without rights at a disadvantage. Pity the poor voter trying to untangle the motives behind every growth question. Then multiply the confusion to every city and county in the state.

It's easy to understand the appeal of Hometown Democracy. The Legislature particularly has proven incapable of resisting developer influence when writing growth management legislation. A favorite expression among Hometown Democracy supporters is that even though the proposed constitutional amendment has flaws, the system couldn't be any worse than it is now. That's not true. Ballots statewide would be full of jargon-laden,

irrelevant junk. Developers who get legitimate plan changes would be penalized. Because St. Pete Beach suffered for three years, Florida can avoid having to suffer for much longer.

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