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## Moderation, thy name is not Amend. 4

November 9, 2009

It's the quiet before the storm at city hall. Commissioners take their seats, scanning a packed chamber full of anxious citizens. Rows of signs punctuate the crowds' sentiments: "Say No to Big Box Developers" and "Vote for the People."

The knocking of the gavel begins the meeting and the developer's attorney leads off an hour-long presentation seeking approval of a comprehensive plan amendment that would allow a super-center.

The mayor opens up the meeting for citizen input. As the first speaker takes the podium, the mayor cautions the audience that each citizen has three minutes to speak, and an egg-timer will keep track. Emotions begin to run high after the mayor interrupts homeowners who exceed their allotted time. Several homeowners demand answers to their questions: Will property values decrease? Will traffic increase? Will the environment be polluted? Nine out of every 10 citizens plead for the commission to protect them from urban sprawl.

It's midnight and the mayor finally calls for a vote. The gasps and groans in the audience reveal the super-center was approved. Dismayed and angered, homeowners file out, shaking their heads feeling their elected officials sided with "greedy developers" over constituents.

Countless Floridians have experienced the gasps and groans at city hall, have read the news about their elected officials siding with Goliath over David and are frustrated by traffic congestion, crowded schools, shrinking natural resources and aging infrastructure.

Environmental lawyer Lesley Blackner, founder of Florida Hometown Democracy, has responded to the public's frustration by offering Amendment 4. It requires a voter referendum on all comprehensive land-use plan amendments. Ms. Blackner has characterized her amendment as a solution that creates more citizen participation.

As a professional who helps corporations adopt citizen engagement practices, I commend Ms. Blackner for highlighting a failing system that everyone agrees is broken.

However, does her amendment fix or exploit the problem?

If a comp-plan amendment goes on the ballot, it becomes a YES or NO political campaign. Political campaigns are the antithesis of citizen participation. St. Pete Beach, the first city to adopt a form of Hometown Democracy, was torn apart by polarizing political rhetoric.

Amendment 4 would overload ballots with hundreds of amendments. Are you going to study and vote on every single amendment? Me neither. Amendment 4 proponents are counting on our apathy, which makes it a wolf in sheep's clothing. This scheme is a community veto that allows anti-growth fringes to target amendments for defeat, creating what James Madison termed the "tyranny of the minority."

When you think about it, Amendment 4 is really a Catch 22. Vote YES, and you get what Madison warned of. Vote NO, you approve a failing system that marginalizes citizens.

Floridians deserve better than a Catch 22. Floridians deserve a constructive debate that seeks to level the playing field for citizens.

In 2001, the Department of Community Affairs recommended bold citizen participation reforms in response to the public's frustration. The proposed reforms required developers to sponsor citizen-participation initiatives, but a lack of political will killed them. Ironically, there wouldn't be Amendment 4 had the reforms become law. Today, we would have a citizen-centered growth management system effectively separating the wheat from the chaff.

Elected officials, environmentalists and real-estate professionals should re-examine the DCA's 2001 growth study report. It can underwrite a constructive debate on how we can remedy the Catch 22 before voters decide on Amendment 4 next year.

If we fail to offer a moderate solution and simply ask Floridians to vote NO on Amendment 4, then frustrated voters will likely approve it. We have a legislative session and special sessions to restore credibility and, more important, regain the confidence of the people of Florida.

The egg-timer is running.

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