



OPINION > OUR VIEWPOINT

Amendment 4 ill-conceived, over-reaching

Print Page

Published:
Wednesday, February 3, 2010 10:07 AM EST

Months before voters get the chance to decide the matter, the debate over a proposed change to the state Constitution, Amendment 4, is gathering steam.

County and city commissions across Florida are weighing in. Just this week, Saint Petersburg voted to oppose it, then sent out e-mails to let everyone know they did.

The amendment, if approved, would require citizen approval of all comprehensive plan amendments. It was devised by a group called Hometown Democracy, which started collecting signatures for its constitutional growth control mechanism during the boom years of the 2000s.

Developers oppose it, of course. They have fought it and will continue to campaign against it. However, a significant factor in the campaign – and what could well doom this ill-conceived amendment – is timing.

Attitudes have changed with plummeting economy. Curbs on growth? At a time when the only stimulants to the local economy are government programs, it will be difficult to convince voters to institute a new, harsher level of impediments to business. With record foreclosures, builder bankruptcies and bank takeovers, it will be difficult to convince people they have to fear over-development, especially considering the unemployment rate. The market has slammed the brakes on growth, smart, dumb and in-between.

We oppose the amendment. The result of passage would be a system so cumbersome and costly it would stalemate the decision-making process for all growth proposals, large and small. The public would well be subjected to superficial, manipulative campaigns about difficult, complex issues. We believe in careful growth, but this isn't a smart way to do it.

One-size-fits-all approaches rarely are. Some comprehensive plan changes can have a big impact; those should get thorough public scrutiny. They do, in fact. The many dozens of small comp plan changes also are open to public scrutiny; it's just that few people bother to pay attention.

Who would blame them? Comp plan changes have pamphlets full of explanations, maps and supporting documentation. To be fair and to understand the nature of for these requests and the potential impacts can take hours of study. It doesn't seem fair to reduce a 60-page proposal to 75 words on the ballot.

That's one reason we elect people to a county commission. We expect them to do the hard work < often mind-numbing < of figuring these things out.

Comp plan amendments have to be explained by the parties proposing them, in public

hearings and with public documents. The public can participate. John and Jane Q can object, pack a hearing with like-minded citizens and campaign against proposals they don't like. If commissioners see it otherwise and approve an amendment, voters can always toss the rascals out.

Hometown Democracy may sound like apple-pie, but our system cannot accommodate public votes on all matters of government. It would be too costly, too cumbersome. Nothing would get done if we held public votes on everything from comprehensive plan changes and zoning changes to budgets and policies. That's why this won't work.

We elect people to make decisions. We have plenty of opportunity to provide input, if we care enough. If we were to insist on tinkering with the minutiae of government, it might well be that nothing gets done.

Which may be the real point of this amendment, after all.

Copyright © 2010 - Lake Wales News

[x] Close Window