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Biz group urged to fight against Amendment 4

Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance expresses concerns

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LAKEWOOD RANCH — The other side has the quick and easy sound bites.

That was the conclusion of those who oppose Amendment 4, known informally as Hometown Democracy, which would put writing in the Florida Constitution requiring a voter referendum on proposed changes to comprehensive plans.

Wednesday, a trio of opponents of Amendment 4 presented its concerns to several hundred members of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance, and asked for their help in defeating the November ballot issue. They admitted that getting their message across wouldn't necessarily be easy.

Among those arguing against Amendment 4 were Ryan Houck, executive director of Floridians for Smarter Growth; Jon Thaxton, Sarasota County commissioner; and Ward Friszolowski, former mayor of St. Pete Beach.

They said research shows Amendment 4 could create gridlock in government, scare off business and mandate costly elections where voters would be asked to mark a ballot on land-use changes they had not studied.

About 10,000 changes are made to comprehensive plans across Florida annually, and each of those would have to be voted on in referendums if Amendment 4 passes, Houck said.

Hometown Democracy would create a toxic, uncertain business climate that would steer businesses considering moving to Florida to other states, Houck said.

"If you like the recession, you will love Amendment 4," Houck said.

Thaxton, who is known as a critic of growth management in Florida, said Amendment 4 is "wrong, too, and two wrongs don't make a right."

Thaxton said he recently met with a group of supporters of Amendment 4 and asked for a show of hands of anyone who knew about six comprehensive plan changes in Sarasota County. Not one hand went up, Thaxton said, illustrating the point that the public tunes out the tedious and mundane world of land planning.

Friszolowski said his town might have been the first in the nation to adopt something like Amendment 4, and called the measure a "nightmare."

As it was conceived, Hometown Democracy requires a referendum on every comprehensive plan change, even those that are technical, minor, or housekeeping in nature, he said.

St. Pete Beach finds itself spending money on litigation over Hometown Democracy, rather than spinning the planning process forward, Ward said.

“We feel like we owe it to the state to share our experience,” Ward said.

Although there was no one present at Wednesday’s meeting to present the other side, Manatee County Commissioner Joe McClash did engage with Thaxton in a debate over Hometown Democracy at Lakewood Ranch Town Hall on Tuesday night.

In that debate, McClash, one of the few public officials who have come out in support of Amendment 4, said he did not see what harm it would cause to allow citizens to put their stamp on comprehensive plan changes.

“It’s all about what is good for the place we call home,” McClash said.

Floridahometowndemocracy.com says of the ballot measure: “Rising taxes, falling home values, gridlocked roads, dwindling water supplies and Florida’s disappearing beauty are just some of the devastating consequences of Florida politicians’ habit of rubberstamping speculative plan changes.

“Hometown Democracy Amendment 4 changes all that by giving voters veto power over these changes to your community’s master plan for growth.”

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