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Amendment 4: Don't follow in town's disastrous footsteps

By Ward Friszolowski | Guest columnist

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In November, Florida voters will decide the fate of Amendment 4, a proposal to change our state constitution. A little more than three years ago, my town — St. Pete Beach — narrowly adopted a local version of this idea.

It has been an unqualified disaster.

Our experiment in Amendment 4 failed to promote wiser growth management, as its supporters promised. Instead, it crippled our economy, chased away business and opened the floodgates for a nonstop series of special-interest lawsuits, at taxpayer expense.

Although they originally promoted St. Pete Beach as a success story, the proponents of Amendment 4 are now frantically claiming that St. Pete Beach is not a fair example. These claims are false, desperate and insulting to the residents of our community, who have frequently spoken against the Amendment 4-style experiment.

To support their claim that the St. Pete Beach comparison is unfair, Amendment 4 supporters have said their process was not followed when the voters of our town approved a series of comprehensive-plan changes at the ballot box, rather than

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submitting them to the City Commission first.

Coming from the same folks who routinely hurl accusations against local elected officials, their calls to respect the decision-making of those same officials seem disingenuous. Are we to believe that Amendment 4 proponents are suing the taxpayers of St. Pete Beach, to overturn an election they lost, simply because they wanted to give everyone a civics lesson?

After all, Amendment 4 is supposed to be simple. According to supporters, it just gives the people a say on growth.

But the voters of St. Pete Beach exercised their say on growth in 2008. If Amendment 4 was about giving us a say on growth, they would have let the election stand. Instead, they are wasting hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars in lawsuits designed to stop progress, even though the voters approved it.

Amendment 4 supporters also blame the problems in St. Pete Beach on developers.

This tired argument falls flat in St. Pete Beach, where that mantra has been used to justify unending litigation at the expense of our town's local business climate and quality of life. Indeed, developers are using the Amendment 4-style process in St. Pete Beach to their advantage. So are the anti-growth activists who oppose them.

In fact, special interests of every description — led by lawyers and political consultants — are taking advantage of a major flaw in Amendment 4: It allows those with the deepest pockets to have even greater influence over the planning process.

They're blaming the symptom (special-interest influence) rather than the cause (Amendment 4).

The problem in St. Pete Beach isn't just one special-interest group or another, but rather, the fatally flawed Amendment 4-style process that amplifies special-interest influence by transforming even minor land-planning issues into high-priced political campaigns. This problem is inherent in the concept behind Amendment 4.

Some of the lawyers who worked to impose a local version of Amendment 4 on St. Pete Beach are now promising that the endless litigation will not spread to other communities, if the measure is taken statewide. These promises come from the same lawyers who stand to profit so richly should their promises prove false — as they did in St. Pete Beach.

In truth, the lawsuits in St. Pete Beach would become commonplace in every Florida

town; under Amendment 4, many of these legal challenges — such as those dealing with the clarity of the ballot language — would quickly become "copy and paste" lawsuits, readily available to any disgruntled special-interest group on the losing end of a land-planning referendum.

Our local version of Amendment 4 was so disastrous that the voters of our town chose to scale it back in 2009. Because Florida would be the national guinea pig for Amendment 4, we simply cannot afford to ignore its obvious failures, as witnessed by the first community in our state to adopt a local version of this idea: St. Pete Beach.

Ward Friszolowski is the former mayor of St. Pete Beach.

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