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Matt Reed: Ballot measure targets cities

Space Coast cities face big potential changes, starting with the fall ballot.

You soon could be asked routinely to vote on taxes, spending and any changes to local growth plans. Why not trust mayors and commissioners to decide?

For insight, I turned to Cocoa Mayor Mike Blake, a past president of the Space Coast League of Cities. First elected to city office in 1998, Blake is an outspoken booster for a town known for its charming Cocoa Village, its struggles with crime and poverty in other neighborhoods and a huge water utility that finances the city while serving much of Central Brevard.

QUESTION: Our state lawmakers seem likely to support a bill called the Taxpayer Bill of Rights, or TABOR. Earlier proposals called for a constitutional amendment to cap government revenue at the rate of inflation plus population growth. The public would vote on special increases or new levies. How might that affect your city?

BLAKE: As you alluded to, we provide regional water services to over 80,000 customers throughout Brevard County. The population of Brevard is about 525,000, and we serve about 240,000 people -- nearly half. That's been one of our main concerns. That's our breadwinner for the city of Cocoa.

We will continue to provide professional water services for our regional area. We have some of the best-tasting water in the southeastern region -- the only water to go to the moon and back, from the great City of Cocoa.

Q: So, you're always pushing for new customers.

BLAKE: Absolutely, sir.

Q: What about property taxes? Revenue is at pre-boom levels, but don't cities still have to serve more people and businesses from the growth?

BLAKE: Yes sir, we do.

We're trying to add to our population and get a few more rooftops so we can have a steady tax base, so we can provide quality services for Cocoa. I'm a firm believer in trying to vote for no tax rate increases. I'm trying to keep our rate at the current rate without layoffs.

Q: On the fall ballot, Amendment 4 is the "Hometown Democracy" measure, which would require voter approval of any change to city and county growth plans. Leslie Blackner, president of Hometown Democracy, said officials' negative reaction "shows how scared big business and its politician friends are by the possibility that voters might get some oversight over their sweetheart deals." What do you make of that?

BLAKE: I teach eighth-grade U.S. history, sir, and we have what's called a republican government. You elect representatives to voice your concerns and address your issues. And that's what we do. If the citizens don't like their elected officials, then they can vote them out of office.

The old adage is, if you don't grow, you're bound to die. You will perish if you don't have a vision. Well, we have a vision.

Change is not always easy. But if you elect people to represent you, you should voice your concerns and give them an opportunity to do their jobs. That's the American way.

Q: What types of planning changes would citizens be asked to decide?

BLAKE: Any modification. An example, on State Road 524, we were looking at Crosswinds, a humongous mall comparable to what's in Viera. We didn't receive it. Since then, we've decided to downsize, and as the economic growth improves, the market returns, then we will have the opportunity to build a smaller one.

If citizens approve Amendment 4, Hometown Democracy, then every modification to that plan will have to come to a vote. Do citizens want to pay for that referendum each and every time?

Q: Amtrak decided to put stops in to serve new passenger service. Where will Cocoa's station go?

BLAKE: It will be on Rosa L. Jones Boulevard and will be called the Cocoa-Rockledge station. From years ago, the depot is still there. A business is there now.

We've had several workshops to include the community. It's going to enhance our tax base. It's going to redevelop that area. It's going to expand the beautiful downtown area, which is a stone's throw away. If you want to go to the beach or port area, we will provide transportation for you.

It's going to motivate that community. Hooray for the citizens of Cocoa! Job well done.

Q: But will the city incur any liabilities? What if the train service goes belly-up?

BLAKE: Federal stimulus money will pay 80 percent, and the city of Cocoa will have to pony up 20 percent. That's where we will provide redevelopment of the building and provide services.

But here's the kicker. Not only will it provide a train station. It will also provide a bus station. So, it is multipurpose.

Q: This fall's ballot includes a county charter change that would let Brevard cities "opt-out" of . . . something. Explain.

BLAKE: We're talking about the home-rule dual vote. If a law comes down in reference to the whole county, if a city does not approve, then it has the right to opt out.

Q: Opt out of what? Like, a vote to consolidate police or fire departments to save money?

BLAKE: Yes, sir. If you wish not to be a part of the overall consolidation of services, such as fire or police, the city has the right to opt out if the citizens voted that way.

Q: Any such proposals afoot now?

BLAKE: It all depends on how the market returns. The citizens of Cocoa, we like having our independence.

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