

This article discussing misconceptions about the Hometown Democracy movement was published in the September 10 edition of the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce's weekly newsletter.

What Will "Hometown Democracy" Really Mean?

Hometown Democracy. Sounds good, right? Fair, patriotic, citizen based. Petitions are circulating across Florida on university campuses, in public places and via email calling for a Constitutional Amendment to essentially "give the power to the people" by requiring that all future development subject to local comprehensive land use plans be approved by voters through local referenda. But think about it. What will that really mean?

In his My Word column published in the *Orlando Sentinel* on August 19, Orlando Regional Chamber President Jacob Stuart said, "They have proposed a constitutional amendment that would by-pass the elected officials who currently make land use decisions and put the decision-making responsibility squarely on the shoulders of citizens. Without providing principles or guidelines to help citizens make educated choices the likely result is a complete halt of development. This would derail our economy and destroy a taxing structure that currently allows Florida residents to pay less in local and state taxes than residents of most other states."

At the Chamber's August Board of Governors meeting, a Resolution was unanimously passed opposing the proposed amendment to the Florida Constitution that would force voters to decide all changes to a City of County's Comprehensive Plan.

To those unfamiliar with the issue, the petition and proposed ballot language sounds like "Mom and apple pie" using all the buzzwords that citizens really do care about. However, in the discussion preceding the Board of Directors vote on the Resolution, several members of the Board shared their perspectives on the issue including the following comments from Dan Kirby.

Chamber Board Member, Dan Kirby, AIA, AICP, Director of Development Services for Boyken International, pointed out that "As a three term Chair of a Local Planning Agency, someone that has worked on a City Planning staff, and as someone with a deep concern for growth management, I view the so called "Hometown Democracy" effort as a potential economic disaster. On a first read, the ballot measure appears to make some great points with its flowery language on protecting the natural environment and citizen participation, but the result of this measure in practice would create a situation far worse than what we have today. The passage of this ballot measure could actually result in more sprawl and less efficient conservation of land."

"Land use decisions are varied, complex, and messy," he added. "The difference between a good project and a bad project is often in the details. When I served on a planning commission, we spent many, many hours doing our homework to sort out these pros and cons. We had to weigh many variables including: conservation, economic development, efficiency of infrastructure, public services, impact on existing neighborhoods, etc. These were tough decisions."

"Reducing the consideration of hundreds of plan amendments to a ballot measure would turn complex decisions into sound bites and rhetoric. It is the near equivalent of replacing juries and courtrooms with verdicts based on TV clips and phone responses. Do we really want land use policy dictated by the people that can afford to hire the best PR firm? We could see a huge backlog of projects waiting to appear on the ballot and there are potentially thousands of jobs at stake. We would also become a far less competitive for businesses that need to expand or in the provision or

workforce housing. As citizens we need to express our desire for responsible growth management and protecting the environment, but the change presented by this ballot measure would make the problem worse."

An informational sheet was provided by *Floridians for Smarter Growth*, which was formed "to fight the extreme special interests bent on destroying Florida's constitution and unique quality of life." The organization states, "The so-called 'Hometown Democracy' amendment, a statewide 'Vote on Everything' initiative, is a grave threat to Florida's future . . . The amendment subverts a well-established, open, accessible and democratic planning process."

Based on an analysis of data provided by the Florida Department of Community Affairs, *Floridians for Smarter Growth* provides the following statistics for your consideration:

What if the Amendment Were Law Today?

- Statewide over the last four years, an average of 10,599 local referenda were conducted per year.
- Over the past four years in Broward County, every voter would have had to decide an average of 686 amendments per year.
- Last year, people in Carrabelle (Franklin County) would have had to vote on 840 amendments.
- It would not be unusual for local voters across Florida to be expected to vote on 200-300 comprehensive plan amendments per year.

Are the registered voters of Florida ready and willing to make that kind of commitment?

Are you?

For more information on this important issue, we direct you to www.flsmartergrowth.org

The Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce is shaping our community's future by focusing on what matters to the millions of people who call Central Florida home. Strategic imperatives that include Medical School & Medical Community Development, Level One Trauma Center, Public Facilities & Venues, Workforce (Affordable) Housing, Transportation, Education (PRISM), Regional Growth Vision, and Chamber Enterprise provide clear focus to our 1,000-Day Agenda.

Your business. Your community. Your future. Your chamber.

For additional information, visit:

www.orlando.org