

This My Word Column by Jacob Stuart appeared in the August 19 edition of the Orlando Sentinel. It suggests that rather than completely change our governmental system regarding land use decision-making, as suggested by proponents for Hometown Democracy, Florida would be better served to continue the steps being taken in Central Florida to create a vision for our future and then hold leaders accountable for moving toward that vision.

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OTHER VIEWS - MY WORD

There's a better way than Hometown Democracy

By Jacob V. Stuart

Florida, and specifically Central Florida, is the envy of our nation and the world. We have a vibrant economy, temperate climate and quality of life that make this an attractive place to live, learn, work and play.

For these reasons, we have grown at a faster pace than the national average since the 1920s, a trend that is projected to continue over the next 50 years. However, in recent years we have not been wise in how we have grown. At our current pace, Central Florida will develop as much land in the next 45 years as was developed in the previous 440 years.

Some suggest that the solution is to "lock the gates" by creating land-use policies that would make it unattractive for developers to build new homes and for people to relocate to Florida. The "Hometown Democracy" movement embraces this misdirected strategy.

They have proposed a constitutional amendment that would bypass the elected officials who now 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.

But there is another option for our future that would not make it impossible to attract new businesses or force our children and grandchildren to look elsewhere for where they will live and work.

During the recent "How Shall We Grow?" campaign conducted in Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola, Polk, Seminole and Volusia counties, 20,000 Central Floridians said that we can change our path if we have a shared vision for our future. The Central Florida Regional Growth Vision uses six principles and four themes to create a balance between economic prosperity and our desired quality of life.

Focusing on Conservation, Countryside, Centers and Corridors, the vision focuses development in appropriate locations while maintaining the conservation and agricultural lands that provide our regional character. Additional transportation options and corridors would improve mobility and allow residents more time with family and friends and less time in gridlock.

Regional leaders have already pledged to use the vision as their guide for creating a different future, and it is our responsibility to hold them accountable for their choices and actions. For the vision to succeed, elected officials will have to make tough choices by refusing to maintain the status quo.

Exercising the will of the "combined voices of the people," through a representative form of government, is the essence of democracy. It has successfully guided our country for 231 years and should not now be compromised. If it is our wish, the future for our region and state can be different than our current path; but, instead of trying to "force change" by altering our constitution, we need to work together to help our elected officials and leaders make our collective wishes a reality.

Jacob V. Stuart is the president of the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce. He also serves as president of myregion.org, a regional development program.