
Hometown Democracy expected on 2010 ballot

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Both the people for and those against the Hometown Democracy issue expect it to be on the November 2010 statewide ballot.

Allison Megrath, a professional land-use planner who has projects in Highlands County, outlined both the pros and the cons of this controversial state constitutional amendment.

Some groups, including the Florida Chamber of Commerce and the 1,000 Friends of Florida environmental group, claim that if Hometown Democracy is adopted by voters it will kill new-job development and lead to worse environmental protection, Megrath said.

Megrath, the guest speaker at Monday's meeting of the Highlands County Homeowners Association, pointed out that supporters of Hometown Democracy say it will give citizens the power to control land-use decisions and take that authority away from the politicians.

Proponents of this proposed constitutional amendment argue that wealthy developers and lobbyists often control the local and state government officials who now make the decisions on land-use changes.

The group which gathered more than 700,000 signatures of registered voters to put Hometown Democracy on the statewide ballot was motivated by two main beliefs, Megrath said.

In short, she said, proponents believe that Florida's growth-management laws don't adequately prevent urban sprawl and degradation of the environment, and also don't do enough to protect a community's "quality of life."

And, she said, most backers of Hometown Democracy believe giving the control over land-use decisions to voters will stop "corruption" in which developers unduly influence government officials.

"The main focus (of Hometown Democracy supporters) is to put the power back into the hands of the people and to let you, the voters, make the decisions on comp (comprehensive) plan amendments and land-use planning," she said.

Amendments to a county's comprehensive plan, which controls land-use changes, must be approved by the county commissioners and the state's Department of Community Affairs in a complicated 14-step process that usually takes at least 18 to 24 months, Megrath said.

Property owners, citizens groups and local governments can propose comp plan amendments to change land uses.

Megrath urged the audience at the homeowners meeting to study all information about, and the arguments for and against, Hometown Democracy.

On the ballot

This issue is virtually certain to be on the November 2010 statewide ballot, she said, and its passage or defeat will have major implications for economic development, environmental protection, smart land-use planning, and government operations.

As president of her own firm, Land Planning Solutions, based in Bonita Springs, Megrath is a certified land-use planner. One of the company's clients is AtlanticBlue, the large corporation which has proposed a new city of up to 120,000 people on 65,000 acres at the Blue Head Ranch in southern Highlands County.

Megrath said she was speaking neither for nor against Hometown Democracy, but simply trying to give people information about this proposed change in how Florida governs land use.

Opponents of Hometown Democracy say it would stop new development and kill projects that would bring in new jobs because getting voters to approve any change in land-use policy would be extremely difficult, Megrath said.

She also said opponents say Hometown Democracy will not take away the influence of wealthy developers and corporate lobbyists on land-use decisions. If it is approved by voters, she said, the developers and lobbyists will have to spend large sums of money on advertising campaigns for land-use proposals going on the ballot.

Corruption

While supporters of Hometown Democracy argue that it would "eliminate corruption in the development approval process," Megrath said, opponents say it will result in big-money advertising campaigns to influence voters.

Megrath also said that in putting land-use decisions before voters, Hometown Democracy could "pit neighbor against neighbor."

As an example, she said, there could be a land-use change that would allow a job creation project in the southern end of Highlands County. Voters in the southern end could oppose it because they don't want the project near them, while voters in the northern end of the county could support it because it's "not in my backyard."

Megrath said putting land-use changes before voters could also kill essential-service government projects such as needed prisons, landfills or hospital expansions, because voters may take a NIMBY (not in my back yard) stance.

Obedience comments

One member of the audience, retired sheriff's officer Paul Hinman, said Hometown Democracy was proposed because people were tired of county commissions throughout the state approving "willy nilly" just about every land-use change requested by a developer, while ignoring the concerns of residents.

Gabe Read, another audience member, expressed the same sentiment. He said Hometown Democracy was proposed because many people in Florida feel there is no use in expressing their concerns to government decision makers.

Many Floridians, Read said, feel that fighting for or against a land-use issue "is of no use - that you 'can't fight city hall.' "

Megrath stressed that she wasn't supporting or opposing Hometown Democracy. She said she was urging people to get all the facts on this issue and then make their own informed judgment when they vote on it in 2010.