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Initiative would hurt growth

In politics, creative marketing may be the difference between success and failure. That's why convincing Florida voters to oppose Amendment 4, the so-called "Florida Hometown Democracy" constitutional amendment, is no easy task. After all, how could "Hometown Democracy" be anything but good for our state?

However, Amendment 4 will stifle growth and adversely affect our state unlike any other ballot initiative in recent memory. It requires that the adoption of all local governments' comprehensive plans and any amendments to such plans be subject to the approval of the electorate at a referendum election.

A comprehensive plan is a community-development tool that local governments are obligated by law to create and maintain. It articulates a community's goals as they relate to growth and development. Comprehensive plans address in detail many facets of development, such as transportation, land use, recreation, open space and utilities.

They are composed of hundreds of pages, and the professional staffs of most local governmental agencies include people who are specifically educated in the comprehensive-planning and amendment process. While the final determinations related to a comprehensive plan currently rest with elected officials, the actual comprehensive planning process is filled with statutory and technical analyses performed by trained professionals.

Notwithstanding the complexity of comprehensive land-use planning, supporters of Amendment 4 maintain that a proposed change to a comprehensive plan can be conveyed to voters on a ballot within the confines of the 75 word limit and in a way that enables voters to make informed decisions. That is absurd. Anyone who has voted recently knows that ballot language is often difficult to understand, even when it pertains to what should be a relatively straightforward issue.

How will the questions raised in planning documents that are hundreds of pages long be condensed into meaningful 75-word ballot questions?

Then there is this: In the last four years, Amendment 4 would have required approximately 10,000 local referenda per year around the state at taxpayers' expense.

With the confusion and disagreements that Amendment 4 would spawn, we also can expect to see claims and litigation involving local governments and the court system, for which Florida taxpayers will bear the costs.

Experimenting with the ballot box can have unexpected consequences. Since Broward County is a charter county, not only would the electorate of each municipality need to vote on some

proposed local land-use changes, but the whole county would be required to do so. This can pit neighborhood against neighborhood and result in planning that is no better than the current system.

If examples speak louder than words, anyone who thinks Amendment 4 is good for Florida should have a look at what happened in St. Pete Beach, a small Pinellas County town of about 10,000 people. It adopted a local version of Amendment 4 in 2006. The town's economy stagnated. It has been involved in about a dozen lawsuits and spent around \$750,000 in legal fees for matters associated with the ``vote on everything" experiment.

Amendment 4 is not the right remedy for the flaws in our land-use planning system. We elect local public officials to represent the best interests of our communities. If we are dissatisfied with the results of their decisions or do not trust them, then we should vote them out of office. We should stay informed, participate in city government and voice our opinions. That is true hometown democracy.

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