

A Times Editorial

A formula for gridlock

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Despite four years of heavy artillery from the Florida Chamber of Commerce and others, a citizens' petition aimed at giving voters veto power over developers' plans finally has reached the ballot. The so-called Hometown Democracy initiative, which would require voter approval for changes to any local government comprehensive plan, will appear on the November 2010 ballot as Amendment 4. But as tempting as it may be for Floridians to embrace the measure because they're fed up with elected officials' failure to rein in growth, it is the wrong approach. Hometown Democracy identified a problem, but its solution would lead to gridlock.

As a three-year experiment in St. Pete Beach shows, land planning via referendum is a messy, unpredictable business that leads to higher government costs due to litigation and a stalemate when it comes to development. Hometown Democracy backers argue that is preferable to the status quo, where developers too easily get their way with local officials. But replacing an imperfect model with one just as flawed — and just as likely to be exploited by well-financed developers — isn't the answer.

The case of St. Pete Beach is instructive. A 2006 Hometown Democracy-like citizen petition won there after the city commission approved comprehensive plan changes increasing density and height allowances. Fearing condo canyons like those found in South Florida, voters repealed the changes and voted to require all future comprehensive plan changes to go before voters.

But by June 2008, a group backed by development interests took full use of the initiative process to convince voters to support a business-friendly comprehensive plan. Now all sides are in court and the Florida Department of Community Affairs has yet to rule whether the 2008 plan complies with state law. The upshot: This city of 10,000 has incurred \$240,000 in legal fees this fiscal year. It has budgeted

\$265,000 for next year. And owners seeking to change or develop their property remain in legal limbo, unsure which density and height restrictions apply.

The balance of power hasn't changed in St. Pete Beach, just the rules of the game. Now, instead of negotiating with city planners or trying to curry favor with elected officials on major land-use changes, developers are able to put something on the ballot for an up-or-down vote and make the calculated investment to win the election. Lost are any negotiated compromises with city officials.

Development interests are often far better at the political game than the grass roots opposition. For the four years Hometown Democracy has been collecting signatures, the state's big business lobby has been the driving force behind changes to the constitutional amendment process, from tighter petition gathering requirements to raising the required voter approval rate for amendments to 60 percent. It persuaded the Legislature to pass a law allowing petition signers to revoke their signatures — a law the Florida Supreme Court struck down earlier this month. And now, the lobby, though supposedly opposed to constitutional amendments, is backing a sneaky one of its own for the 2010 ballot that would gut Amendment 4's mission. The measure, pushed by a group known as Floridians for Smarter Growth, would only require elections on comprehensive plan changes if 10 percent of voters travel to the elections office to request a vote. That is even more unworkable than Amendment 4.

Developers hold too much political influence at all levels of government, which was reinforced by Gov. Charlie Crist's indefensible decision to sign SB 360 and gut Florida's growth management laws. Floridians' concerns about unchecked growth have been largely ignored, and Hometown Democracy has tapped a legitimate anger.

But turning complex community development decisions into an up-or-down vote without any quality negotiations won't solve that problem. It will take electing candidates who embrace growth management and responsible development.

[Last modified: Jun 27, 2009 09:35 PM]

Newest FirstOldest First

. **Joannie from Largo**

. **Jul 3rd, 2009 1:13 pm**

. I too would like the chance to vote on development issues. If the process is too complicated for some people, they don't have to vote but I would like to have the option. I take my right to vote with a dose of responsibility to learn the issues.

. **John from St Pete**

. **Jul 3rd, 2009 8:33 am**

. I for one would be glad to have the chance to vote on development issues in my community. Florida politicians have proven they cannot be trusted and can do much damage by the time they may or may not be voted out. FHD gives us the vote for a change.

. **Mike from SPB**

. **Jul 3rd, 2009 7:19 am**

. Bud hit the nail on the head. Tremendous amount of details for residents to learn. On SPB they are complaining the 75 word ballot description did not describe what the residents were voting on. With the right to vote comes responsibility to learn.

. **Bud from St Pete Beach**

. **Jul 2nd, 2009 4:52 pm**

. Lorraine, your right on. I don't want to take the time to study the details to vote on this stuff. Most people won't have the time. Their lives are too busy with personal matters. Only elected officials can be held accountable and have the time.

. **Lorraine from St. Pete Beach**

. **Jun 30th, 2009 4:08 pm**

. For those readers who perceive that Hometown Democracy is "the answer" for Florida let me tell you that from a citizen who lives on St. Pete Beach Hometown Democracy does not & will not improve our state. We must vote for qualified trusted officials

. **Alex from Tampa**

. **Jun 29th, 2009 7:22 pm**

. The point of FHD is to stop growth. You must live with your current land use. If you're not already zoned for a land use, you can't change it. If that stop growth, fine! We have a decade's worth of unsold houses to eat through.

. **Jill from Dade City**

. **Jun 29th, 2009 6:55 pm**

. Planner isn't the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council supposed to be

analyzing how plan changes affect the region? What's the difference between a comprehensive plan and the purpose of future land use designations? FLU is an integral to those plans.

. **Bud from Tampa**

. **Jun 29th, 2009 9:30 am**

. It's pretty evident "the people" don't trust government these days. "Of the people, by the people and for the people" now often appears to be Government vs the people. Thus the popularity of this bill.

. **Chris from Tampa**

. **Jun 29th, 2009 9:27 am**

. Once HD passes, maybe we could write concurrency into the constitution to keep a spineless weasel like Charlie Crist from selling us out like he did with SB360.

. **ctb from st. pete**

. **Jun 29th, 2009 7:49 am**

. Sick & tired of the 'if you don't like what they do, vote 'em out' mantra - please explain how that's possible w/ gerrymandering?The Fair Districting initiative needs to pass as well before we see that happen.

. **Planner from Florida**

. **Jun 29th, 2009 1:14 am**

. Jill: there is no such thing as 'comprehensive land use plan' in FL law. It's 'comprehensive plan'; if you want to deal w land use only, it's 'future land use map' or 'land use element'. DCA agrees w my understanding; ask them.

. **Jim from St Pete**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 9:12 pm**

. We can't trust our elected officials to do the right thing when it comes to growth management. One politician/developer scandal after another. I'll take my chances and vote Hometown Democracy even if it means taking a little more out of my pocket.

. **Marty from SPB**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 6:44 pm**

. For Frankie - no the lawsuits won't go away. the people voted the pro HTD people did not like the way they voted so they sued saying the people did not understand what they voted for. So much for the right to vote.

. **Marty from SPB**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 6:38 pm**

. So tired of idiots always complaining about elected officials. Don't like them, then vote them out except then you would just find another conspiracy to complain about.

. **Jill from Dade City**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 3:44 pm**

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Yes, we do need representative government, (of the people, by the people and most importantly, FOR the people). But what we've got is government which represents the power of political contributions and the will of lobbyists and special interests.

. **Frankie from Lakeland**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 3:16 pm**

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I see all the pro-development folks from St. Pete beach are weighing in. Won't all these lawsuits go away once it IS state law? FHD may be our last chance for real growth management.

. **Gregory from St Pete Beach**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 1:13 pm**

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These lawsuits that people unhappy with election results keep filing against the city will surely cost us city services and personnel, as will \$20,000 special elections. Taking this idea statewide is sheer insanity. We need representative government.

. **Lenny from SPB**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 12:58 pm**

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Taxpayer's, What's in your wallet? Take heed, St Pete Beach is going broke from all this Hometown Democracy rule.

. **Fran from St Pete Beach**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 12:23 pm**

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St Pete Beach is living proof that Hometown democracy will be a disaster for this state. The answer is to limit terms of elected officials and boot them out if they don't represent the community's wishes.

. **Doug from StPete**

. **Jun 28th, 2009 11:36 am**

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So, our only recourse is to elect honest politicians? In FLORIDA? Get real.