

ORLANDO SENTINEL
Scott Maxwell TAKING NAMES

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You know who really scares Buddy Dyer and the rest of the folks down at Orlando City Hall?

You.

Yep, the City Council and staff said as much this week during a lengthy discussion on Hometown Democracy — the upcoming amendment that would give voters the chance to have a direct say on the growth of their community.

The politicians do not like this idea — not one bit.

They like to be the ones giving developers what they want — whether it's a Super Walmart or far-flung subdivision.

You, after all, might say no.

So Buddy staged a not-so-fair-and-balanced presentation for his council this week.

His staff vowed to give both sides of the debate on Hometown Democracy.

And would you like to guess how much time — during a half-hour workshop — the planning staff dedicated to describing the potential benefits of the amendment?

89 seconds.

The rest of the presentation from staff and discussion among council members was full of hand-wringing over just how uninformed voters were — and just how bad life might get if you actually get a say in the growth game.

Buddy warned about the potential atrocities:

"You'd have residents in Christmas making decisions about Bay Hill or Windermere ..."

Oh, no! Not the unwashed masses from Christmas!

The next thing you know, those know-nothings in Zellwood — or, heaven forbid, Taft! — may start trying to get in on this whole Democracy thing.

We can't let that happen.

Buddy's example was a little misleading — because residents in unincorporated parts of the county, such as Christmas, would not vote on projects within incorporated cities and towns such as Windermere.

For the most part, city residents would vote on city projects. And county residents would vote on county ones.

But Buddy is right that unincorporated Christmasians would get to vote on projects that would primarily affect unincorporated Bay Hillians.

So the question at the root of Hometown Democracy is: Whom do you trust more with major growth decisions?

The good people of Christmas?

Or Hal Kantor? (Or any of the many other high-powered development attorneys who cut campaign checks and hobnob with the elected officials who so often vote the way their clients want?)

Hometown Democracy — known as Amendment 4 on your ballot next year — essentially asks whether you want the chance to vote on major projects in your community.

It's clear that Orlando officials find that prospect scary.

During Monday's council meeting, everyone from Commissioner Patty Sheehan to the planning director warned that voters might cast votes in ignorance, with selfish motives or based upon campaign sound bites.

Apparently, when you vote for these politicians, you demonstrate the wisdom of Solomon. When you vote against something they like, you're uninformed dolts who must be stopped.

The development interests opposing Hometown Democracy have taken a different tack, arguing that the measure would "stop growth."

They lie.

Even Buddy's staff admitted as much this week, saying that Orlando could grow and develop "for years" without ever needing to ask voters for approval.

That's because there is already a glut of overdevelopment — and, more important, because plenty of land is already zoned for new projects.

It makes sense to develop that land first — which Hometown Democracy would encourage.

A better argument opponents make is that if Hometown Democracy passes precisely as written, it would be too cumbersome, complicated and extreme.

On that point, they're probably right.

But I don't believe for one minute that Hometown Democracy would take effect precisely as written.

Florida politicians, after all, have a track record of changing the rules of the game when they start losing.

Remember the "education" lottery?

How about the class-size amendment?

Twice, voters tried to get state officials to pump more money into schools.

And twice, state politicians tried to wiggle out of it — turning the lottery into a shell game and searching for loopholes and ways to cram more kids into classrooms.

They will do the same thing with Hometown Democracy: water it down and exploit every loophole to placate their buddies in the development industry.

If it's amending a city's "comprehensive land-use plan" that triggers a vote, politicians may just change the definition of "comprehensive land-use plan." You get the idea.

Even if Hometown Democracy passes, growth in Florida still won't be as responsible as some people want.

But it will be a lot more responsive to the people than it is now.

And you can bet it will send a message — one that might surprise all those politicians who thought you weren't paying attention.

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