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Hometown Democracy Amendment Threatens Economy, Property Rights, Affordable Housing

By Leonard Gilroy, AICP

A group called “Florida Hometown Democracy” is gathering signatures for a constitutional amendment requiring a referendum on any proposed change in comprehensive land-use plans. Those are the “comp plans” that guide the type and location of development in a city or county.

In most Florida communities, this decision-making responsibility is shared by elected officials and urban planners at the local and state levels. As part of the process, citizens serving on planning boards conduct thorough reviews of development proposals in an effort to balance a host of interrelated concerns, including economic development and environmental quality.

Hometown Democracy would place decisions about growth and development in the hands of the voters, many of whom are more interested in getting their kids to soccer practice or trying to keep their businesses afloat than the nuances of real-estate markets or the economic viability of different types of land development.

Granted, Hometown Democracy’s plan has a surface-level appeal. The name itself conveys an alluring image of empowered citizens in neighborhoods of white picket fences. But this populist mask conceals an anti-growth, “close the gates” agenda that could threaten housing affordability,

economic opportunity, and private property rights.

Hometown Democracy would turn Florida into a laboratory for a statewide experiment in the radical sort of “ballot-box zoning” that has fueled sky-high housing costs in places like San Francisco, where the median housing price now stands at \$620,000.

A 2001 study in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* examined ballot-box zoning in 63 Ohio cities and concluded that subjecting rezoning decisions to public referenda had a consistent negative impact on housing construction. Fewer homes being built translates into higher housing costs for everyone.

Florida already faces a severe shortage of affordable housing, and the need for more housing will grow because the state is projected to add 12.7 million more residents by 2030. Therefore, making it harder to develop new housing will drive up prices and push low- and middle-income families ever further away from the American Dream.

Likewise, the amendment would threaten the state’s economic health. Giving voters a *de facto* veto power over commercial development will make it far more difficult for mom-and-pop shops and large corporations alike to start up, expand,

and/or relocate. That would imperil Florida's recent status as the national leader in job creation.

It could also slow the growth of the tax revenues that commerce provides. As a result, city and county governments may feel pressure to hike tax rates as a means to increase local revenues in the absence of robust economic growth.

More fundamentally, Hometown Democracy represents a direct frontal assault on private property rights. Under the current planning system, property owners have recourse to appeals and formal procedures for regulating development in the community interest.

Throwing landowners' ability to develop their property to the whims of public opinion shaped by costly public relations campaigns embraces the ultimate tyranny of the majority over individual property rights.

Last November, almost 70 percent of Florida's voters supported a constitutional amendment to protect private property rights from local governments' abuse of the power of eminent domain. So it's clear that Floridians care very deeply about protecting private property rights. Hometown Democracy would be a significant step backward.

Statewide, thousands of local comprehensive plan amendments are adopted each year as local communities adjust to new economic conditions. The decisions are made after extensive hearings and reports from consultants and experts on land development.

Most voters can't possibly do the research necessary to cast an informed ballot on every single development proposal in their community. To expect them to do so is both unrealistic and unreasonable.

But, of course, the Hometown Democracy Amendment is not about better

planning. Rather, it's a goal of anti-growth zealots who have become known as BANANAs: "build absolutely nothing anywhere near anyone."

Yet reasonable citizens already have a strong voice in community planning. The law requires urban planners, planning boards, and elected officials to provide numerous opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions on comprehensive land-use plans and, subsequently, on individual development proposals.

These professionals weigh public input seriously in their analyses and decisions. Hometown Democracy would subvert this well-established process, reducing opportunities for families and businesses and threatening Florida's economic future.

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