

Guest commentary: Amendment 4 empowers citizens to vote on their community's future

Andrew Dickman / Naples

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Florida's 1985 Growth Management Act was a promise to all Floridians that they would have a fair say in decisions about the future of their communities. That promise has been broken. Big development and politicians control our destiny, while citizens get three minutes to voice their opposition at public hearings in front of their elected officials.

The act promised to manage population growth and direct new development away from sensitive environmental areas and stop urban sprawl. The law promised to stop incompatible developments from damaging the quality of life in your neighborhoods and diminishing your property values. The statute promised that your future comprehensive plan would only be amended under very limited circumstances. All are broken promises.

After 25 years, not one planning study calls Florida's growth-management system a success. Yet, year after year, despite persistent lobbying, Tallahassee watchdog groups and professional planning associations settle for concessions to important planning laws. Meanwhile, citizen activism and disenchantment grows.

Florida Hometown Democracy was established by citizens who said enough is enough. After more than six years of fighting against the lobbyists and politicians connected to big development who would rather keep the status quo, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that Florida Hometown Democracy's referendum to amend the state constitution will be on the Nov. 2 ballot. "Amendment 4" will require that all city- or county-approved changes to the future land-use plan will not become effective unless a majority of voters in that city or county approve it. In my opinion, this will guarantee that citizens have an equal voice and seat at the table with big development and the government.

The opposition relies on fear and disinformation. They claim that land-use plans are too complicated for the average citizen. They say that too many amendments are approved by local governments every year and that voters will be overwhelmed. They argue annual construction jobs and related industries that rely on uninhibited growth

will be destroyed. They falsely claim that Florida Hometown Democracy wants to stop all development, which is completely false.

The truth is, Florida Hometown Democracy was founded on the notion that citizens should not bear the cost of hit-and-run developers and that elected officials must be held accountable when they change future land-use plans. Amendment 4 seeks to inspire disenfranchised citizens who, under the current system, can only watch as the state's natural resources and infrastructure fall apart.

Those who benefit from keeping growth management complex do not want you to understand it and they fear making the planning process transparent.

I have taught law students, hundreds of trade organizations, homeowner associations and civic groups about the Growth Management Act. What I have learned is that if your intent is to empower rather than confuse, then growth management isn't that complicated. I believe that all citizens should know more about what their government's future plans are for their community, and I strongly believe that the public should be allowed to fully participate. Amendment 4 is an opportunity for that to happen.

A fundamental strategy of Amendment 4 is to slow the number of amendments to future land-use plans in order to guide new development into areas already designated for that growth. Future land-use plans around the state already have enough land set aside to accommodate development for decades to come.

Six years ago, the University of Florida concluded that if the current trend of amending future land-use plans continues, the state will become 45 percent urbanized by the year 2060, three times more than it is today. The UF study also concluded that Southwest Florida will become a continuous band of urban development, and that "natural systems and wildlife habitat corridors in the region will be fragmented, if not replaced, by urban development."

Based on this study, the University of Central Florida determined that if we don't select an alternative path, the total cost of urbanizing land would amount to at least \$695 billion by 2060 and an additional \$85 billion will be needed for additional highways and major roads to serve dispersed, newly urbanized areas. All studies on the topic conclude that we simply cannot afford the current trend.

Population growth and development isn't necessarily the problem. The real challenge is managing that growth and development. Unfortunately, innovative development patterns realistically will not happen until big development and the government are held accountable by Amendment 4.

To learn more about this, visit www.floridahometowndemocracy.com.

Dickman is a land-use attorney based in Naples. He earned his master's degree in urban and regional planning from the University of Florida and he is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners. He previously was policy director for the Conservancy of Southwest Florida. Dickman currently serves on the Collier County Environmental Advisory Council and he is an adjunct professor at Ave Maria School of Law teaching land-use and environmental law.



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