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'An awful lot of development'

The Tampa Tribune

Every legislative session, pro-growth lawmakers try to weaken growth rules. This year the pretext is to restore lost construction jobs, as if a worthy motive validates the false assumption that state and local governments have somehow stopped developers.

It was overbuilding, the collapse of the housing and financial markets and the related recession, not growth restrictions that ended Florida's real-estate boom.

Throughout the painful slowdown, developers have been busy applying for, and winning, permission to build. In 2007, 2008 and 2009, according to the state Department of Community Affairs, local governments approved 1,856 changes to their land-use maps.

Nearly 600,000 new dwelling units were approved. That's more than three times the amount needed to accommodate the state's actual three-year population growth.

The new projects may all have been worthy of approval, but they do add to a large capacity for new houses already available in local growth plans, not to mention the inventory of existing homes on the market. Construction has not begun on most of these newly approved, ready-to-go projects, and is not likely to begin this year.

Nonresidential capacity also has been increasing rapidly, even as the state's unemployment rate has gone up. In the last three years, more than 1.3 billion square feet of floor area has been approved for new or expanded stores, offices and industries.

That much commercial space is equal to about 13,000 Walmarts.

"That's an awful lot of development," says Tom Pelham, head of Community Affairs.

Most of the nonresidential changes were made last year as developers rushed to get projects approved before the possible passage of a state constitutional amendment called Florida Hometown Democracy (Amendment 4).

That cumbersome measure, which will be voted on in the November general election, would require voter approval of any change in local land-use plans.

The unpredictability and expense of running everything past voters would be a significant barrier to growth. But the strong push for the amendment by some environmentalists and civic activists is a reaction to frequent changes made in local growth plans.

The best way for state leaders to convince voters to reject the amendment is to stand firm on existing

growth laws designed to balance the need for growth with protections for taxpayers and the environment.

Local leaders can help by being less eager to approve requests for sprawling, poorly designed projects.

It can be argued that the development-approval process should be streamlined, but it can't seriously be argued that state and local rules are to blame for silencing the nail machines, saws and bulldozers.

In addition to the nationwide recession and banking crisis, Florida has its own problems.

Unemployment is rising and is not expected to peak until this summer. Rates for property insurance have gone up. Lawn watering is widely restricted. Many roads are inadequate for the traffic they carry.

Tax reform failed to make the system fair for all homeowners; some still pay much more than their neighbors.

Florida is no longer one of the least expensive states in which to live; it is among the most costly. It is a less desirable destination than it was a decade ago.

No wonder there are rumblings from voters about seizing more control of growth decisions.

Yet Florida remains a special state with enormous appeal. Even a modest neighborhood in an ordinary town offers coveted amenities, including bright winters, swimming pools, palms and live oaks, and year-round cookouts in the back yard.

Florida's economic recovery and future growth depend on how well its leaders deal with the real challenges faced by residents.

The state cannot restart the population boom, even if it rezones every pasture and forest for houses and apartments.