

A lesson in how not to manage growth

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Florida voters will decide this year whether to move local land use decisions to the ballot box, and St. Pete Beach's three-year experiment along a similar path offers a good lesson on the downside of letting voters manage planning by election.

There are indeed some important differences between what has happened in St. Pete Beach and Hometown Democracy, the constitutional amendment expected to appear on the statewide November ballot. But the concept of giving residents a "yes" or "no" vote over land use decisions that were previously decided by elected officials is being thoroughly tested in St. Pete Beach. And its version of "hometown democracy" has proven to be divisive, expensive and an impediment to much-needed redevelopment.

St. Pete Beach became ground zero for the hometown democracy movement in 2006 after city officials amended the comprehensive plan to increase height and density allowances. Residents who feared the changes would lead to rows of 15-story hotels along the barrier island organized a citizens petition to undo the changes. Voters approved the measure, repealing the changes in height and density allowances and amending the city charter to require all comprehensive plan amendments to pass voter approval — the first city in Florida where the public had such sweeping authority.

It didn't take long for the growth advocates to get in the game. In June 2008, a different citizens group proposed a comprehensive plan more friendly to developers that won voter approval. Critics filed lawsuits against the city and the citizens group. Settlement negotiations have collapsed, the city's legal bills have exceeded \$300,000, there are serious questions about whether the city violated the Sunshine law and development has ground to a halt.

In the November city election, St. Pete Beach voters decided they didn't need to vote on all comprehensive plan changes but just those affecting height, density, intensity of use, or land use categories. They also voted to retain control over any height-related changes to another city document, a set of laws known as the Land Development Code, unless those height changes had been approved in a previous referendum.

Defenders of the statewide efforts are technically correct when they say their measure isn't as sweeping as what happened in St. Pete Beach. Yet the potential for dysfunctional government is the same. Comprehensive plans are thick, technical documents usually written by professional planners. Elected officials are best situated to shape those plans to match a community's long-term vision for its future. Putting that control under direct democracy, as happened in St. Pete Beach, invites short-term thinking and frequent referendums that are even more susceptible to well-financed campaigns by powerful interests. It also invites lawsuits and retards economic development. Florida has serious growth management issues, but Hometown Democracy is not the solution.