

Democracy or dictatorship? Just look at St. Pete Beach

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Although it has been widely discredited by Florida's top economic and environmental leaders, a tiny group of wealthy extremists continues to peddle the myth that "Hometown Democracy" would ease Florida's growing pains. A few sympathetic journalists have even started preaching the dogma themselves.

In her column on Wednesday, Lauren Ritchie claims this amendment would give "residents who live here right now . . . a say over how their state will grow." Fortunately, a perfect example of the "Hometown Democracy" amendment in action can be found right here in Florida. Unfortunately, it proves Ms. Ritchie's assertion dead wrong.

In 2006, the small tourist town of St. Pete Beach became the first community in Florida to adopt "Hometown Democracy"-style rule. The result, I think, has been an unparalleled economic crisis and a seemingly endless legal nightmare.

Trapped in a "Hometown Democracy"-imposed legal limbo, countless businesses have been forced to close. A once-thriving tourist town, St. Pete Beach now suffers from what I view as a chaotic and unpredictable investment environment that has laid waste to its economy.

In 2008, a coalition of St. Pete Beach business and community leaders finally succeeded in placing four comp-plan changes on the ballot. Fed up with the economic hardship created by "Hometown Democracy," the residents of St. Pete Beach voted overwhelmingly to approve all four comprehensive-plan changes. In a stroke of brazen hypocrisy, "Hometown Democracy" disciples then sued to overturn the very election they said would give people a "voice."

Why? Put simply, they didn't like the result. Despite the claims of a few stalwarts, "Hometown Democracy" is not about empowering voters. "Hometown Democracy" is about stopping all growth, at any cost.

Indeed, "Hometown Democracy" leaders in St. Pete Beach have filed legal actions aimed at invalidating, delaying or outright preventing democratic elections in the town that once embraced their idea.

Worse still, taxpayers have been forced to foot the bill for this seemingly endless string of lawsuits. It appears that the message from "Hometown Democracy" is "You can have any opinion you want, as long as you agree with us."

Before you believe Ms. Ritchie's claim that this "vote on everything" amendment is no more than a veto power on future "pig farms" and the like, consider this: "Hometown Democracy" would allow residents living on the other side of the county to decide the future of your community.

For example, the residents of Lady Lake would be voting on land-use permitting issues in Leesburg. The residents of Umatilla would be making decisions on new projects in Clermont. And the voters of Oxford would be weighing in on new hospitals, schools and community centers in Bushnell. In the long run, the "vote on everything" amendment diminishes the rights and representation of those with the greatest stake in the land-use debate -- the people who must live with the results.

Unfortunately, communities on the losing side of a "Hometown Democracy"-style referendum would find it nearly impossible to build new schools, public parks and emergency-care facilities -- many of which require land-use changes. Similarly, communities that are outspent and outvoted by neighboring interests would find the "pig farms," "nuclear-waste disposal facilities" and landfills squarely in their backyard.

That's one of the reasons the "Hometown Democracy" amendment is opposed not only by Florida's business community but also by top environmental and growth-management groups such as 1000 Friends of Florida. Before buying the "Hometown Democracy" bill of goods, I urge every journalist and every resident to carefully examine the merits of this proposal and to never forget the sad saga of St. Pete Beach.

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