

Democracy's the key word

By Susan Woods
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I dunno. That's usually what I say when someone asks me if I think Florida Hometown Democracy is a good idea. FHD is the controversial proposal that's going to be on the November ballot. If it passes, it will give all residents of Florida the opportunity to have final say over whether local comprehensive-plan changes, like the one that Lyn Recio and I worked to defeat, will be approved.

FHD sounds, on the surface, like a good deal, but then I get to thinking, what if FHD passes, but Marion County's residents just sit on their hands when it comes time to make decisions about how this county will grow? Or what if developers, who are very skilled at what they do, manage to outspend citizen groups in a big way, in advertising and promoting their vision of how we should grow?

Citizen groups seem to be popping up more and more these days, not just in Marion County but all over the state. Some of them have had some very impressive wins lately, as they try to gain local control over their neighborhoods' futures. It could be a reason to be optimistic, but on the other hand, it costs an awful lot of time, money and effort to oppose a land-use change decision. Ours took the better part of two years, and we're still paying off our bills. Your average citizen group doesn't necessarily have the kind of time and money that it takes to get the job done every time a land-use change pops up for approval.

Developers are pretty good at what they do, and they're used to doing it, and they have lawyers and office staffs to get things done. Most citizen groups don't. It's hard to say how long it will be before, one by one, the war horses of the anti-sprawl and environmental protection groups will just have to quit, in order to save their health and sanity. I count myself as one of the war horses these days, though I'm a relative newcomer to the ongoing fight to preserve open spaces and intelligent growth. I know people who have been badly battered by the process over many years, and it's a wonder they keep on keepin' on.

This year, Marion County is rewriting its comprehensive (growth) plan - that's the roadmap that governs where new growth will be allowed in the county for the next 10 years or so. All citizens of the county are welcome to be part of the process by attending evening meetings scheduled on Thursday nights from now through October. Everybody who attends gets to speak their mind if they choose to - you don't have to be an expert, or even a war horse. Or you can just sit and watch, if you prefer.

Our county has about 350,000 people these days, but when I attended the first of this series of meetings, there might have been 50 or so people, and that included 10 people or so from the

county's Planning Department. Another 10 were developers and their people, who were there to have their say, and the rest were mostly the usual people who try to keep Ocala from becoming a version of Orlando. It wasn't exactly standing-room-only.

So, back to the FHD discussion. I'm leaning more and more towards thinking that FHD can only help folks like me, who seek to preserve open spaces and our irreplaceable aquifer by demanding careful and balanced growth. The mantra, "They're coming, we have to provide for them" rings hollow to me. I mean, who are they, and why do we have to let them all come here?

Can't we say, "This is our vision for the county, and if you fit into that vision, you're welcome to be here, but we can't just let every square inch of land be covered with homes and pavement. There are too many treasures here worth saving."

The problem is, I keep having the nagging thought: What if Hometown Democracy does become a reality, and we finally can have a real voice in how our community will grow, and then only 50 people show up to vote?

Susan Woods is a Marion County horsewoman who is active in local environmental affairs. She gained notice last year when she successfully challenged a Marion County comp plan change allowing an 800-home development, appealing it all the way to the Florida Cabinet.