

County to urge 'no' vote on 4

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Published: April 6, 2010

The Jackson County Commission is expected next week to consider a resolution that, if passed, would urge citizens to vote against the proposed Amendment 4.

The resolution is scheduled for discussion on April 13, at the commission's 9 a.m. meeting.

The proposal will appear on the November general election ballot in Florida and must be approved by 60 percent of the participating voters to become law.

Under its provisions, Floridians would vote on every proposed change to their municipalities' comprehensive plans.

It would, for example, allow voters to decide whether a landowner could change the use of his or her 10-acre parcel of property, since even small-scale land use changes require a change to the county's comprehensive plan.

Currently, decisions on comprehensive plan changes are generally left to city and county commissions and the Department of Community Affairs, the state agency which oversees the plans. The process does include a public hearing process, where individuals can speak for or against the proposed changes.

The man who recently came to talk with Jackson County leaders about the possible negatives of the amendment found himself preaching to the choir, in some cases. Some commissioners said they felt it's passage would be costly and detrimental.

Tony Bennett, administrator of HealthSouth Emerald Coast Rehabilitation Hospital in Panama City, explained to commissioners and staff last month why he's trying to help defeat Amendment 4 in November.

Bennett said that, on average, 10,000 changes a year are made to comprehensive plans in Florida's 67 counties, and its municipalities.

Having voters decide on all those would clutter ballots, significantly increase election costs, choke economic growth and destroy communities, Bennett said.

He asserted that while it is "touted as a hometown democracy" issue, it is "not a grassroots effort."

Bennett claimed a quartet of strange bedfellows were the main proponents, including special interest lawyers, adult entertainment interests, the Sierra Club and population control advocates. He said "the no-growth people" pumped money into a campaign to see a similar provision through in a Pinellas County town in 2006.

He presented a slide show which he said represented overall conditions in St. Pete Beach, after a similar measure passed there. He said the law was responsible for turning the "quaint, beautiful" community into a virtual wasteland by way of the "unpredictable and chaotic investment atmosphere" it created.

Developers, unsure about whether the voting public would approve their projects, were unwilling to risk their money, he said.

If the measure passes, the cost of holding the elections would likely have to be passed on to the individuals or companies seeking the change, another fact that could stunt growth, according to Bennett.

Lawsuits arose over elections results in St. Pete Beach, and virtually wiped out the town's legal budget, Bennett said.

Proponents of the amendment say it will help protect the environment from unbridled growth by giving the public in each affected community a say in what can and can't be built, and where.

Opponents say it will promote sprawl and undermine good planning practices.

Chad Taylor, a local environmental activist, said he hasn't made up his mind about the amendment yet.

"Anybody that looks back over the past three years and sees the unbridled growth and development that took place then, you have to ask yourself if we want to go back to the way things were done then," Taylor said. "In the absence of something better in place, you have to think, 'Don't just stand there, do something even if it's wrong.' You look at the four-story condos on the coast, and you have to think that something has to be better than this.

"But I haven't taken an official position on it because there are a couple of different ways to look at it. I'm not sure what I'd do if I were voting right now."

Following Bennett's presentation last week, commissioners had the resolution drafted for consideration at next week's meeting.