

Voting On Everything Dispirits Tourist Business In Tourist Town

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St. Pete Beach has become a living laboratory to study the statewide consequences of a proposed constitutional amendment called Hometown Democracy.

Voters in the little Pinellas County town decided two years ago not to change their local growth plan without majority approval at the polls. Ever since not much has gotten done, which seems to be what the anti-growth faction pushing the change had in mind.

A new plan to enliven the business center and allow reasonable growth within the hotel district is scheduled to go to voters June 3.

But a lawsuit has been filed to stop the election because some residents say four of the six ballot questions are misleading.

That's a main problem with Hometown Democracy, the proposed state amendment that would require local voters to approve all changes in community growth plans. It's hard, if not impossible, to condense a complex plan into meaningful ballot language.

Amendment 3, for example, says it would set "height standards that encourage commercial and temporary lodging uses."

A voter who doesn't do extensive homework won't know what that means. How high, and what happens to hotels and motels if voters say no?

The stakes are high for hotel owners. If the contested amendments can't be voted on or if they're rejected by voters, many beachfront hotels will remain stuck in legal limbo, out of compliance with existing rules.

The investment environment is chaotic, to say the least. Major repairs or renovations trigger a requirement for lower density, which would force the hotels to get rid of rooms, which would drive them out of business.

The prohibition on rebuilding complicates the tasks of buying insurance and attracting customers.

Instead of adding conference rooms, parking underneath, and energy-saving renovations, the hotels can only make minor changes, such as painting.

From the regional perspective, voting "yes" seems an easy choice for St. Pete Beach. Residential

sections of the beach town would be preserved, the hotel district would be allowed to rebuild up to a maximum of 12 stories, utility wires would be buried, and sidewalks improved.

Supporters of the plan note that no new resort hotel has been built in 33 years, and that 14 hotels closed in the last six years. Unless hotels are allowed to improve and compete for business, they will follow the trend toward conversion to condominiums. New hotels need to be a certain height, at least 12 stories, to make a return on investment, say proponents of the amendments.

The loss of more hotel rooms would be bad news for the many restaurants, shops and bars that depend on a steady stream of visitors.

But regardless of how the town decides it wants to grow, the issues are bewildering. In an earlier vote on a plan, voters saw signs saying vote yes to save the hotels along with signs saying vote no to save the hotels.

Issues have been oversimplified in the campaigns as homeowners vs. developers, preservation vs. growth, low-rise vs. high-rise, tourist trap or serene residential retreat, decay vs. progress.

Voters could easily end up unknowingly voting against their own best interests. That's no way to run a little city, and it's certainly no way to run a state.
