

Homegrown democracy issue debated in Collier County

By I.M. STACKEL

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Come November, Florida voters will decide whether they want to make their own land growth decisions, sans local government.

Amendment 4, also known as the Florida Hometown Democracy movement, would enable the average voter to weigh in on any amendment to their local government's growth management plan.

Monday, **Women League of Voters of Collier County** hosted a debate between Lesley Blackner, president of the statewide movement, and Florida Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples.

Blackner, who sponsored Amendment 4, grew up in the Jacksonville area and has witnessed rampant growth in Florida. Despite state requirements for growth management plans, elected officials in each of Florida's 67 counties – and more than 400 cities – bow to the wishes of developers by granting them favors.

The state and local growth management plans haven't worked very well in Florida, and have produced "ugly sprawl and overdevelopment," she said.

"Development gone wild has taken Florida's economy over the cliff," Blackner said.

The rubber-stamping of developer requests by elected officials has produced a glut of commercial and residential construction, she said. That glut is now driving down the value of residential and commercial properties, she said.

Reiterating a statement that has often been attributed to former Speaker of the U.S. House Tip O'Neill, Hudson said "All politics is local."

People in Collier County know their council members and commissioners. They can talk to them.

Collier can't be lumped in with the rest of Florida's counties.

"Collier County is the largest land mass county east of the Mississippi," he said. Do Collier residents want voters in Pinellas, Wakulla or Broward counties making their decisions for them, he asked.

"We're unique," Hudson said, adding that Collier has been very responsible about growth and development.

Some "83 percent of our county is owned by the federal, state or local government for conservation purposes, and as citizens we're agreed to tax ourselves to buy more land for Conservation Collier," Hudson said. "That (also) makes us unique."

Collier has three incorporated municipalities, whereas the balance of the land mass is in unincorporated Collier County.

How does one compare that to, say, Broward County, which has 31 municipalities, Hudson asked.

Tim Nance, who has been active in the Golden Gate Estates Civic Association, asked Blackner how many amendments have been made to Collier's plan in recent years.

Blackner didn't have an answer. The Florida Department of Community Affairs, which oversees growth management plans, hasn't kept very good statistics on that, Blackner said.

"Some jurisdictions hand out (comprehensive) plan amendments like it is Halloween candy," Blackner said.



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