

ST. PETE BEACH: TROUBLING DEVELOPMENTS IN A “HOMETOWN DEMOCRACY” TESTING GROUND

By Ryan Houck

In 2006, St. Pete Beach became the only city in Florida to adopt a local Hometown Democracy (HD) measure, requiring voter approval for all comprehensive plan changes. Since becoming an HD test case, residents of the small Pinellas County town have endured seemingly endless legal battles, unavoidably chaotic elections, and serious economic setbacks. The local tourism-based economy has stagnated and costly legal and administrative delays have prevented the city from complying with state growth mandates.

Playing by Hometown Democracy rules, community leaders in St. Pete Beach organized an effort to reinvigorate the local economy by placing four comprehensive plan changes on the ballot. Eager to end the legal and economic malaise, the voters of St. Pete Beach decisively approved all four plan changes in a special election on June 3rd, 2008.

Lawsuits soon followed. Indeed, the same anti-growth activists who championed the “right to vote” are now seeking to overturn a free and fair election. In fact, Hometown Democracy disciples have filed nearly a dozen lawsuits aimed at stopping, stalling or invalidating the will of the people in St. Pete Beach.

In a recent development, Florida Hometown Democracy (FHD) Co-chairman Ross Burnaman filed a legal challenge that seeks to overturn the election. Most Floridians will marvel at the brazen hypocrisy of a group that preaches “power to the people” while simultaneously seeking to frustrate elections at every turn.

FHD leaders have claimed that Hometown Democracy is all about the voice of the people. However, the message they are now sending to the residents of St. Pete Beach is perhaps closer to the truth: “you can have any opinion you want, as long as it’s ours.”

This is the natural result of a system that encourages conflict rather than compromise. In fact, most observers will not be surprised that the same Hometown Democracy supporters who campaigned on ‘the right to vote’ now seek to overturn an election. They don’t really want to empower people; they want to stop all growth at any cost.

If Hometown Democracy is aimed at stopping growth, then its leaders should have the intellectual courage to say so. However, if their idea is really about letting the will of the people prevail then FHD leaders should withdraw their legal challenge and let the election stand.

Although it will not appear on the 2008 ballot, we can expect a full-fledged campaign in 2010. With your help, Floridians for Smarter Growth (FSG) remains dedicated to building that campaign and alerting every community to the dangers of this radical

proposal. If you want to get involved, please visit the Floridians for Smarter Growth website at www.Florida2010.org.

Ryan Houck is the executive director of Floridians for Smarter Growth, the statewide campaign against the so-called "Hometown Democracy" amendment.