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HERES WHY HOMETOWN DEMOCRACY FAILS

By Michael R. Caputo

On April 23, a state appeals court ruled unconstitutional a law allowing Floridians who have signed an initiative petition to change their minds and revoke their signatures. The decision is a disappointment for Florida's business and community leaders who supported the new law to keep bad ideas out of Florida's constitution.

The ruling now goes to the Florida Supreme Court, but even if it stands, the decision changes nothing about the 2008 Florida ballot.

Even if the revoked signatures are restored, Hometown Democracy still missed its mark by a mile.

Why has Hometown Democracy failed to make the ballot three times?

Because the amendment has no grass-roots support, and mainstream green donors refuse to fund it. The environmental community is deeply divided over the proposal, part of a broader split illustrated by the national Sierra Club's recent sacking of its entire Florida leadership.

The 116-year-old national conservation group had never in its history fired chapter officers, and Florida members are reeling. Backstabbing and board brawling tore the Florida chapter apart. At the core of the fight is the growing trend of environmental groups to engage businesses for lasting change. Mainstream green groups view a working relationship with the business community as key to protecting our environment. But extremists such as those who seized control of the Florida Sierra Club chapter believe working with business betrays the cause.

This group helped foist on Floridians a proposed constitutional amendment that would require local residents to vote on hundreds of technical land-use amendments every year while creating a planning and economic train wreck. Florida Sierra leadership helped bankroll a strategy to bring paid petitioners from out of state to collect signatures.

When 1,000 Friends of Florida announced its opposition to the Hometown Democracy amendment, Hometown backers pilloried the state's most respected growth watchdog as a tool of big business. But opinion leaders recognized the stand as courageous. Newspapers editorialized against Hometown, the paid hawkers found fewer Floridians to sign the petition, money dried up and the amendment went down again.

Today, policymakers can take heart knowing that Hometown Democracy is not a popular uprising.

It is nothing more than a carnival-bus-style, paid petitioning effort.

In fact, without the checkbooks of two or three people, Hometown Democracy would have

died of natural causes years ago, along with dozens of obscure amendments filed every year that never go anywhere.

In Hometown's collapse, activists took an issue of abiding concern to Floridians (growth management) and thrice failed to put their idea on the ballot. Meanwhile, issues with narrower public appeal (such as pregnant pigs) make it to the ballot almost entirely through volunteer efforts. This illustrates how radical Hometown Democracy truly is.

Without mainstream support, Hometown's supporters reached further into Florida's fringe. Joe Redner, owner of Tampa's notorious Mons Venus strip club, is one of Hometown's biggest donors and most interesting public speakers. Similarly, in Daytona Beach, strip-club interests bankroll a local version of Hometown Democracy.

Why strip-club owners? According to one city commissioner, strip-club owners don't want local officials to use current land-use laws to rein in smut.

Another Hometown funder is a population-control group that wants to totally close America's doors to immigration.

Given the radical nature of the Hometown Democracy proposal and the fringe elements that bankroll it, is it any wonder most mainstream environmental groups try to stay as far from the entire issue as they can?

Florida is a beautiful and wonderful state; Floridians enjoy a unique quality of life. Everyone who lives here, native or transplant, wants to protect that for future generations and ourselves. The vast majority of us, green or not, also know complex challenges are best solved by people willing to work together for the long-term common good despite disparate immediate goals.

Florida's future would be better served by such a citizen's coalition than by the Hometown Democracy approach of everyone backing into his own corner, waging war and fighting to the death.

Michael R. Caputo of Miami served as executive director of Floridians for Smarter Growth, the business-backed group fighting the Hometown Democracy amendment.