

Amendment 4 Seen as 'Economic Poison'

By Robert Burns

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ORLANDO – “If you like this recession, you’re going to love what happens if this passes,” said David Patten of Commercial Mortgage Advisors and one of the founding members of central Florida’s “Presidents Council.” Mr. Patten was referring to an upcoming ballot issue this autumn, a ballot initiative called “Amendment 4.”

On Friday morning, March 12, dozens of concerned business and political leaders from all over this area convened in Orlando to discuss the possible implications of Amendment 4. Harold Costello of communications firm Hill & Knowlton said the voters of Florida simply don’t realize how bad this ballot issue is.

“They don’t understand the unintended impacts of this measure,” said Mr. Costello as his brow furrowed.

Ostensibly, the ballot initiative is designed to take control of growth and development issues away from city commissions and councils, and place the decision making process into the hands of the average voter; basically forcing each municipality across the state of Florida into a public referendum virtually every time a project goes up for planning or development.

Former mayor of Orlando Glenda Hood attended the meeting. She said she has grave misgivings about the final impact of this initiative.

“Too frequently in the past, we made hasty development issues,” said the senior stateswoman. “Unfortunately, this is a very bad response to that issue. Now, we’ve

moved away from Smart Growth, and very foolishly plunged into, what I believe, will be ‘no growth.’ If we want to survive, ‘no growth’ is not an option.”

Sitting beside the former mayor, immediate past president of the Southeast Volusia Chamber of Commerce Bob Lott listened intently.

Other industries and businesses represented in the room were: Government, real estate pros, engineers, law firms, construction firms, marketing experts, health professionals and last but not least, a spokesman for Central Florida’s High Tech Corridor.

“Luggage,” quipped Fred Leonhardt, chair of the President’s Council. “That’s the word that springs to mind. It Amendment 4 passes here in Florida, it will be great for the state’s luggage industry.” (Meaning many businesses will move out of state).

According to these business leaders, the voters of Florida need to understand approval of this measure, will not only halt many present projects, it will actively keep any forward-thinking businesses from possibly moving to the Sunshine State in the future.

“I hope everyone thinks about these numbers,” said Ryan Houck of the Florida Chamber of Commerce. “We’ll lose \$4 billion in state taxes right away, each voting district will be overwhelmed with ballot issues – 200 to 300 per each time we go to the polls – if this is passed, and we’ll suffer \$34 billion in overall economic losses and potentially, hundreds of thousands of job lost.”

Patrick Slevin, senior vice president

of Hill & Knowlton and chief strategist for the Presidents Council Amendment 4 campaign, said, it’s terribly important that people simply “know the issue before them.”

“Right now, there’s a small group of people pushing this issue. They’re calling it ‘Hometown Democracy,’ but it’s certainly not that.” Mr. Slevin said, because of the confusion and expense of the issue on Florida, elected officials will be marginalized, special interests will end up actually controlling the issues and worst of all, it won’t even protect the community’s common interests.

“There are no easy answers,” said Mr. Slevin. “This is why a seemingly simple proposition like Amendment 4 is so deceptively dangerous.”

Mr. Slevin said every voter must become aware of the impacts of this amendment. “We believe, once people are informed, they’ll fight against it with all they’ve got,” said Mr. Slevin. He then pointed to the state’s one success story in defeating this type of “throwing the baby out with the bath water” approach.

“Edgewater, Florida,” said Mr. Slevin. “Two years, the people pushing this bill, were exploiting fear. We informed the people of Edgewater, and they threw out the bad laws and drafted ‘smart growth plans,’ as a community.” He said the rest of the state would do well to address the issues of growth and development on their own terms.

“Otherwise, it’s a bleak future all businesses and people face, here in the state of Florida,” said Mr. Leonhardt.