

Voters decide; fight goes on

All six St. Pete Beach referendum questions are approved in heavy voting Tuesday.

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ST. PETE BEACH — Tuesday's referendum failed to settle the long and hotly debated battle over how this beach community will be redeveloped.

Even though voters approved all of the controversial redevelopment referendum questions, legal issues remain that cloud the election results.

A new lawsuit filed Monday promises to further delay any resolution to maximum building heights, density, zoning and myriad other development issues that have virtually paralyzed long term planning here.

Intense interest in the debate over development regulations was clearly evidenced in the relatively high turnout — more than 45 percent of the city's voters cast ballots.

All six referendum questions passed easily. The first two noncontroversial questions passed by 82 percent or more. The four petition-initiated ballot questions garnered solid 55 percent or better support.

"It is what it is. We definitely needed a new comprehensive plan," said Mayor Mike Finnerty, adding that it was "bothersome" the ordinances were written by a citizens group rather than the commission.

Four ballot questions were proposed by Save Our Little Village (SOLV), a citizens' organization that successfully petitioned for the referendum. They asked voters to either approve or reject ordinances amending: the city comprehensive plan creating a community redevelopment district; the large resort section of the city's land development code; the city's general standards for redevelopment; and the city's Town Center core development regulations.

Complicating the election result was a more than five-hour delay by the city in providing copies of the long and complicated ordinances that were the subjects of the six referendum questions.

The city charter requires that full copies of any ordinances subject to referendum be available at polling places in case voters want to view them.

This was not done.

Lawyer Ken Weiss, who lost his lawsuit last week challenging the ballot summaries, said several voters called him to complain. He, in turn, called the Supervisor of Elections Office to report the incident.

Nancy Whitlock, a spokeswoman for the Supervisor of Elections Office, called City Clerk Teri McMaster, who then put copies of the ordinances at the city's two polling places — one at 12:40 p.m. and the other at 12:58 p.m. The polls opened at 7 a.m.

Whitlock said she did not receive any complaints from voters, only the call from Weiss.

"Given the closeness of the election, accurate ballot summaries could easily have made the difference," Weiss said.



Times editorials

Beach city at crossroad

To see just how complicated and unmanageable land planning by referendum is even in a small city, look no further than St. Pete Beach.

Voters there have been fighting for years in City Hall, the courts and in the streets over where and how development can take place. Now they have another referendum Tuesday, featuring a half-dozen questions with enormous implications that are impossible to fully explain on the ballot, on yard signs or in short conversations.

St. Pete Beach is an eclectic mix of strong-willed residents who want to preserve the small-town feel and avoid high-rise canyons — and of tourists who drive the area economy. It features a popular old movie theater, a landmark pink resort and a stagnant hotel strip that hasn't seen a new hotel in decades and has watched more than a dozen close in recent years. Regardless of Tuesday's vote, the beach is not going to stay the same. The trend toward condominiums over hotels will continue when the economy revives, and those motels and hotels that do survive will continue to age without significant improvement. Or reasonable planning and development changes will be approved that encourage redevelopment and new hotels while pro-

tecting the character of the beach.

The last attempt to move St. Pete Beach in a positive direction backfired, in part because the city failed to seek common ground with opponents. Voters in 2006 did not just narrowly repeal a master development plan that would have allowed hotels along one beachfront stretch to grow from five stories to 15. They revolted and made St. Pete Beach the first city in Florida to embrace the Hometown Democracy concept that threatens to go statewide, approving city charter amendments giving voters control over other plan or major land use changes in the future.

Since then, the pendulum has started to swing back toward the middle. In March, three candidates backed by the local antidevelopment activist group Citizens for Responsible Growth lost in mayoral and city commission races. The new majority voted last week to fight a prominent CRG supporter's effort to have the courts knock four of six referendum questions off the ballot, and a judge ruled this week they can stay on the ballot. It is time to bring this fight to an end.

The four ballot questions were put on the ballot by petitions circulated by the political action group Save Our Little Village. The group has developed a broader coalition of supporters than previous efforts to change the city's comprehensive plan and land development code. In that spirit, they are pitching the proposals as a compromise. For example, they lower both the proposed density and the height restrictions from the previous failed effort. This one calls for the building height to be limited to 12 stories on nine parcels along about a mile stretch of the Gulf Boulevard beachfront. They also lower density and height limits downtown.

The referendum questions include other forward-looking provisions aimed at raising money for improvements such as sidewalks and landscaping, providing green building standards and requiring resorts to provide public beach access. It's a lot for voters to digest, and it's not the most efficient way to overhaul comp plans and land development codes. But the proposed changes are generally steps in the right direction for a beach community that desperately needs to move forward. St. Pete Beach voters should consider them carefully — and consider the fallout if they fail. The status quo is not a viable option for the long term.