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Will Costa Mesa initiative protect residents or stifle business?

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An initiative filed this week in Costa Mesa is championed by proponents as the tool to protect residents' quality-of-life from large developments and decried by opponents as the business-stifling plan that could destroy the city.

The soon-to-launch petition would give residents the power to veto residential developments and business expansions, by requiring both voter and city council approval for some types of projects.

Residents Jay Humphrey and Rick Huffman, who submitted the petition Monday on behalf of the Costa Mesa First community organization, characterize their initiative as a necessary check against "short-lived council majorities" that cater to developers by altering city zoning and established land-use plans.

"This is designed to give the people of Costa Mesa, who have to live with the changes for 30 or 40 years, the right to determine what the community should be," said Humphrey, a former city councilman and a vocal opponent of the proliferation of high-density housing.

Humphrey said land-use decisions by the city council majority triggered his decision to file the petition. He pointed to a May 2014 council decision to approve a 240-unit project at 125 E. Baker St. with a six-story parking garage, even though the development was in an area with a four-story height limit.

If successful, the initiative would require the Costa Mesa electorate to vote during a scheduled election in order to approve any development that requires both of the following:

- A "major change" in land use, including any change to the city's zoning ordinance, General Plan, Specific Plan or Overlay Plan. Changes to city, school district or right-of-way land would also apply.

- A "significant" impact to the neighborhood, defined in the initiative as adding more than 40 units to a property, creating more than 10,000 square feet of retail or office space, increasing traffic by more than 200 car trips per day, and several other qualifiers.

While Humphrey insisted the new rules would not deter business, Councilman Jim Righeimer said the initiative would create an environment so stringent that no new companies would come to town.

Before Vans recently decided to move its headquarters from Cypress to Costa Mesa, bringing 500 jobs , the council promised the company it could build a 40,000-square-foot addition to the building on the property, Righeimer said. That move to lure new business would not have been possible under the proposed initiative, he said.

"This will destroy the city," said Righeimer, a council majority member. "You have to get a vote of the people for a two-acre lot? It's the actual end of the progress of the city."

Councilwoman Katrina Foley, who campaigned alongside Humphrey during the lead-up to November's election, said she did not know anything about the initiative and learned about it on Facebook.

Costa Mesa First's initiative is similar to a "Greenlight" initiative approved by Newport Beach voters in 2000. That law requires a public vote to approve any new Newport Beach development adding 100 peak-hour car trips or 100 housing units or 40,000 square feet of floor space, and requiring a amendment the city's general plan. Before the November 2000 election, the Irvine Co. led a $650,000 opposition effort to Greenlight, but the measure won with 63 percent of the vote.

In 2006, Newport Beach residents voted down a second, more stringent version of Greenlight, but the original remains in effect.

Costa Mesa's city attorneys will review and summarize the initiative within 15 days. Shortly afterward, the authors can begin circulating the petition and gathering signatures. Petitioners will need to gather the signatures of 10 percent of register voters – 4,969 signatures, as of last election – in order to qualify the elective for a special election ballot.

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