

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Signature gathering for development-veto initiative begins in Costa Mesa

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COSTA MESA More than 40 residents began canvassing the city Sunday, gathering signatures for a proposed initiative that would allow residents to veto some housing developments and business expansions.

The controversial petition would require both voter and City Council approval for projects that meet certain criteria. The initiative's authors say it would give residents a direct say in the development of their city. It has been slammed by opponents as a tool that would repel businesses and stifle growth.

On Friday, Costa Mesa First, a local Political Action Committee and community organization, completed the final steps to launch the petition. The group has until Jan. 6 to gather the nearly 5,000 valid signatures required to qualify the initiative for the November 2016 general election ballot.

"The number of people who volunteered (to gather signatures) is heartening," said Jay Humphrey, a Costa Mesa First representative and former city councilman. "These people feel like they are going to be trapped with all sorts of high density housing in the future... This will give them the opportunity to vote on the things that they'll live with for the next 40 years."

If successful, the initiative would require the Costa Mesa electorate to vote to approve any development if it requires a zoning or general plan change, and would create a "significant impact." The petition defines that term as any project 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.

Several other types of development would also trigger the proposed rules. Costa Mesa city attorneys are reviewing the initiative to predict the scope of the proposal.

Councilman Jim Righeimer said the initiative would severely damage Costa Mesa's economic health, chase away businesses, short potential city revenue and halt the redevelopment of the city's formerly-industrial Westside to housing. He said the public would never get a chance to vote on new developments, because the developers would stay clear of the city if the initiative passes.

"Jay Humphrey wants it to be 1968 (in Costa Mesa)," Righeimer said. "I can't give him 1968. Change happens in communities."

Humphrey has compared his petition to Newport Beach's "Greenlight," an initiative approved by that city's voters in 2000, which has been incorporated into the city's charter. That law requires a public vote to approve any development adding 100 peak-hour car trips or 100 housing units or 40,000 square feet of floor space, and requiring an amendment the city's general plan.

Kim Brandt, Newport Beach's community development director, said she had not heard of businesses turning away from the city because of "Greenlight," and called Newport Beach "a thriving community."

But, Newport Beach's electorate has voted only once in 15 years on whether to approve an individual development. In 2001, voters denied a request to build 250,000 square feet of office space near John Wayne

Airport, voting it down by a 60-40 margin.

“Kim Brandt doesn’t know the businesses that never showed up,” Righeimer said. “And Costa Mesa isn’t Newport Beach, where the 1 percent of the 1 percent live... We have a west side that we’re cleaning up, bringing in new housing, and (the petitioners) wants to stop it from happening.”

Last election cycle, Costa Mesa First paid a combined \$2,600 for print advertisements for Councilwoman Katrina Foley and Humphrey. Foley won a seat on the council, but Humphrey did not. Councilwoman Sandy Genis said she served as treasurer of the Costa Mesa First PAC as recently as September, but she has since stepped down from that role.

Genis said she did not have a direct role in writing the initiative but wants to support it.

“I have asked the city attorney if there is any problem with me collecting signatures, because if not I’d be out there with a clipboard,” Genis said. “Anytime you give more power to the residents, I think it’s a good thing.”

Foley said she did not help conceive the initiative and is waiting to hear the city attorney’s analysis of the document before she decides whether to support or oppose the idea.

“I would prefer to be able to have local control, but I’m just concerned that it might have a too broad of a scope,” Foley said. “If the owner of an industrially-zoned building wants to convert to a restaurant use, would that zone change be subject to voter approval? Because if so, that seems onerous.”

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