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Daily Pilot

Commentary: Initiative would give Costa Mesans say over development

By Richard Huffman and Cynthia McDonald

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On Oct. 9, 2009, Jim Righeimer, currently Costa Mesa's mayor pro-tem, wrote in his [former "Rigonomics" column](#) for the Daily Pilot about protecting the fairgrounds from development:

"How difficult would it be to change the zoning? When you think about it, not that difficult. All it takes is three votes on the City Council."

For the last seven years, the residents of Costa Mesa have seen the City Council majority use that power. Developers bring projects before the council requiring general plan amendments, zoning changes and variances.

Many residents speak in opposition because they believe the projects will change the character of our neighborhoods and affect the quality of life, yet only three votes are needed to approve the projects.

The developers can then sell their approved projects to builders at huge profits and hightail it out of town, never to be seen again and leaving the residents to deal with high density, traffic congestion and impacts on parks and public services, just to name a few problems. This scenario illustrates the problem of short-term interests overriding the long-term interests of the community.

Costa Mesa First's "Initiative for an Ordinance to Give the People of Costa Mesa Control of their Future" would require voter approval for projects that depend on major changes to zoning rules and the general plan.

Rather than waiting for an election and hoping that the makeup of the City Council changes, this initiative would give the voters a voice regardless of who is elected.

The Costa Mesa First initiative is an example of a long tradition of using the initiative process in city planning and zoning. This kind of citizen review of major decisions is widely used in the planning arena, especially in coastal communities subject to economic pressures to increase density.

In the old days, a general plan would be drawn and then left to gather dust while the City Council would act on the many requests for changes to the zoning map, thus giving the power of zoning to the economic and political elite. Although we have a much more open process now, many citizens feel that the process is still weighted in favor of excessive growth.

Now neighborhoods are pushing back against elected officials, whom they view largely as being

influenced by developer interests and unresponsive to citizen concerns about traffic, density, the environment and open space.

The Costa Mesa First initiative is a limited, modest and measured proposal to let voters approve only major land use changes. No landowner or developer would be denied the right to build under current general plan and zoning rules.

This initiative is predicated on the belief that the voters deserve the right to make knowledgeable choices that put the residents of Costa Mesa first.

Although he has voiced his opposition to this initiative, Righeimer also wrote, in relation to his desire to use a voter initiative to lock in zoning laws at the fairgrounds, "The nice thing about an initiative is that once the voters pass it, the City Council cannot change it without a vote of the people."

We agree. The residents are circulating the petition to get the initiative on the 2016 ballot. Visit costamesa1st.com.

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