

Charter Review Board Stays Elected

Good Candidates Needed in 2010 to Protect Citizens' Rights

Unlike other communities, Sarasota County has an independent, elected Charter Review Board with the power to put Charter amendments directly on the ballot for a public vote. That avoids the need to get over 13,000 signatures or a vote of the County Commission.

Developers and their supporters in the local Establishment are scared by that. They know that given the opportunity the people will vote for measures to rein in their control over local politicians and policies, as they have over the years.

On May 6, 2009, the Establishment lost an effort in the Charter Review Board, by a tie vote, to take away the citizens right to elect the body.

In the 1980's and early 90's, the Charter Review Board sponsored good measures, which were approved by the voters, to create \$200 campaign contribution limits for local politicians, to require voter approval for the County to raise property taxes or deepen taxpayer debt beyond certain limits, to require full disclosure of property owners seeking rezonings and to require testimony under oath at rezone hearings so that developers tell the truth.

The problem is that it takes a two-thirds vote of the Charter Review Board to put a measure on the ballot and about half its members are anti-reform. They are supporters of development interests, the Chamber of Commerce and other opponents of citizen power.

This got that way when those forces recruited and supported candidates to take over the Charter Review Board in 1994, in reaction to a Charter Review Board proposal to amend the County Charter to provide a right of citizen initiative and referendum over County ordinances.

The current Charter Review Board has done little but attempt to repeal or weaken the reforms added to the Charter by a pro-reform Charter Review Board in the 1980's and early 1990's. They tried to repeal the tax cap but the voters turned them down. They tried to tie the borrowing cap to annual increases in real estate values but the voters turned them down (later approving a much more modest indexing of the limit to the consumer price index). They tried to repeal the campaign contribution limits (because as we know the developers are the ones who like to pour the big bucks into campaigns) but again the voters turned them down

Ultimately, the anti-reformers want to take away the citizens' right to elect their Charter Review Board and just make it a committee of the County Commission. They tried in 2006 and they recently tried again. They failed both times but unfortunately they're getting closer.

On May 6, 2009, the Sarasota County Charter Review Board rejected on a 5 to 5 tie vote a motion to have a CRB committee draft a proposal to take away the citizens' right to elect the Charter Review Board.

Those CRB members voting for the change and against the public interest: Cathy Layton, Jud Boedecker, Dan McLeroy, Charles Cooper and Frank Moore. Voting against the motion and in the public interest: Stefan Butz, Matthew Fountain, Adam Miller, Debbie Trice and Marie Nisco.

It ultimately would have required a two-thirds vote, that is at least 7 to 3, for the CRB to put the measure on the ballot.

This same proposal was made by CRB member and developer Cathy Layton in 2006 and was defeated on a 6 to 3 vote (including opposition by Frank Moore, who this time voted for it).

The CRB was right in preserving the citizens' right to elect an independent, elected Charter Review Board as a source to put measures on the ballot to protect and enhance citizen rights and interests.

Now we need to work in future elections to restore a two-thirds majority of members of the Charter Review Board who are willing to restore the CRB to its former activist, reform-oriented status, to look out for the interests of the public rather than just the interests of a favored few.

Five of the ten Charter Review Board members are up for election every two years, to a four-year term.

In 2010, reformers Stephan Butz, Adam Miller and Debbie Trice are up for election, as well as anti-reformers Dan McLeroy and Charles Cooper.

Candidates run from five districts (the same as the County Commission districts) but all votes are county-wide. It is a partisan election, so there is a primary as well as the November general election. At present, all CRB members are Republicans except for Democrat Debbie Trice.

Three factors favor running for Charter Review Board rather than other political offices:

- 1) There is no filing fee.
- 2) The position is a fairly minimal commitment, as the Charter Review Board meets infrequently, in evening meetings.
- 3) The financial disclosure requirement is minimal, requiring the listing only of significant property, debts, business interests and sources of income, with no amounts.

Citizens interested in exploring the possibility of running for Charter Review Board in 2010, particularly for the seats now held by Dan McLeroy and Charles Cooper, may Contact Control Growth Now for further information.