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Ballot amendments reflect the will of the people | Guestview

Tracey Tapp Guest columnist

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Columnist Bill Cotterrell recently wrote about statewide ballot initiatives. He noted that if legislators can't ignore them entirely, they "implement them with limits and loopholes." We agree. Not all ballot initiatives are wise or good, but if 60 percent of the states' voters agree with an initiative, it must be acknowledged as the will of the people.

Florida followed the example of other states by allowing ballot initiatives, and has for the most part used them wisely. Consider some of the successful ones: the lottery, fair and balanced voting districts, restoration of voting rights, protecting endangered environments, and classroom size limitations.

Unfortunately, the actions of mostly Republican elected officials have led to multiple failures to protect and support Floridians.

For example, in June of this year, the Florida Legislature voted to eliminate the Lawton Chiles Endowment Fund, which took in hundreds of millions of dollars a year from tobacco companies. The Fund was dedicated to improving health care, particularly for victims of tobacco-related illnesses. The original funding was won in court by Democratic Governor Lawton Chiles, when Florida and other states, mostly with Democratic governors/legislatures, filed suit against the tobacco industry.

The reason for eliminating the fund? To keep the money from being used in the general budget. Why not simply commit to using the money as intended? Rather than using the Fund to improve the health of Floridians, they eliminated it entirely.

And they are at it again with respect to affordable housing. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, shelter is a basic physiological need, along with food. Okaloosa and neighboring counties are currently experiencing insufficient affordable housing compared to demand.

The military build-up, increased tourism, and general population growth have raised the price of housing above the means of many more locals than we have seen in a long time. And this is happening amid the COVID-19 Pandemic when people have seen their income reduced due to decreased hours, layoffs, and disappearing jobs.

In 1992, during the Lawton Chiles Administration, the state legislature passed the “Sadowski Act” to help communities in Florida meet these periodic affordable housing challenges. Realtor Associations and Builder Associations were strong supporters of using the Documentary Stamp taxes associated with home sales to make housing affordable.

During the Jeb Bush Administration (1999), state legislators raided the Trust Fund to cover shortfalls in the general budget, and have done so ever since.

It appears that when state money helps everyday people, GOP Governors and legislators either eliminate the funds or raid them.

So Floridians are mobilizing once again, this time to use the amendment process to help families struggling to find affordable housing.

Floridians for Housing is sponsoring a citizen’s ballot initiative to block Florida legislators from diverting affordable housing funds. If they collect enough petitions, this amendment will be on the ballot in 2022. It’s time to restore the affordable housing Trust Fund and stop state officials from shirking their duty to responsibly fund the state budget. Voters can make that happen.

Tracey Tapp is Chairman of the Okaloosa Democrats.

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