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Support local measures on this fall's ballot

Editorial Board Gainesville Sun

Published 12:01 a.m. ET Oct. 8, 2020

Alachua County voters are considering local issues large and small this fall.

Charter review commissions for both the county and city of Gainesville developed charter amendments for this fall's ballot. The measures include minor changes in charter wording, along with changes that would help address some of our community's biggest challenges.

Voters seeking to be better informed on the full slate of ballot questions are encouraged to read a column published Sunday from Alachua County League of Women Voters President Lynn Frazier (online at <http://bit.ly/alachuacountyballotmeasures>). There you will find pros and cons for each measure, along with links to web pages with more information.

The local ballot measures include changes that would help address some of the biggest problems facing Alachua County: the impact of urban sprawl on natural resources and local services; a lack of affordable housing; and racial and gender bias in programs and services.

One of the charter amendments would establish a County Growth Management Area (or GMA). To better understand this measure, voters should look at a map of the proposed GMA (which can be found with the online version of this editorial or at <https://bit.ly/GrowthManagementArea>).

The map shows the cities in Alachua County; areas beyond their borders designated for future growth; and parts of the unincorporated county beyond those areas, which would fall in the GMA. The county's Comprehensive Plan and land development regulations would govern development in the GMA, even if cities later annexed that land into their municipal boundaries.

The amendment is intended to allow cities room to grow, but keep urban development from sprawling into agricultural and environmentally sensitive land. The measure is needed to put a greater check on the sprawl that has been gobbling up rural parts of our county, which harms natural resources such as groundwater and puts a strain on local services.

County Commissioner Robert Hutchinson said at a recent meeting that the measure would help prevent the kind of sprawling development seen in South Florida. Given the state's permissive approach to development, Hutchinson said, "you've got to come up with tools like this to be able to even slightly slow it down."

Another ballot measure would establish the Alachua County Affordable Housing Trust Fund. It leaves decisions to later on raising and distributing money for the fund, but would be an important first step in addressing a growing lack of affordable housing.

The ballot also includes a measure requiring the County Commission to examine its policies annually and work to eliminate racial and gender bias in the design and delivery of county programs and services. The measure would contribute to a wider effort that is needed to address the wide racial disparities that have existed for too long in our community.

The ballot also includes a renewal of the important One Mill school funding measure, which The Sun previously endorsed and strongly encourages voters to support. Other local measures before voters are less consequential, such as changing the title of Gainesville's clerk of the commission to "city clerk."

We recommend voters that follow the advice of the Vote Yes Local campaign, and groups such as the Suwannee-St. Johns Sierra Club, and back all 11 city and county measures on the ballot. Their passage would contribute to local advances in education, environmental protection, equity and more.