

Group aims to inform about Polk charter amendments

By *BRENDA EGGERT BRADER*
News Chief correspondent

Published: Wednesday, September 10, 2008 at 4:01 a.m.

A coalition of community leaders, businesses and trade and agriculture groups announced Tuesday that it has filed to form a political committee to educate Polk County voters on four proposed amendments to the Polk County Charter.

The proposals will be on the Nov. 4 general election ballot.

Victor Story, chairman of the Lakeland-based Polk Citizens for Good Government, said he "is interested in all things political in Polk County, and we (group members) felt like these were important questions to address to Polk County voters."

"They (Polk County commissioners) felt strongly enough to put these amendments on the ballot. My committee is interested in all four issues to educate the voters," said Story, the immediate past president of the Polk County Farm Bureau and area vice president of Florida Citrus Mutual.

The four proposed charter amendments are:

Amendment 1: This would require all referenda on proposed amendments to be submitted at the next general election held at least 60 days after it has been proposed, not at a specially called election.

Amendment 2: This would require that any county charter amendment be approved by at least 60 percent of the voters.

Amendment 3: This would require that ordinances proposed by initiatives be approved by at least 60 percent of the voters.

Amendment 4: This would require that any change to the Polk County Charter or a vote on a local-option sales tax be held at the next general election at least 60 days after the presentation of the change.

"We have no intention to support any changes of the ballot," Story said. "All we are saying is that we would like it to be voted on in a general election.

"Sixty days before the election gives people time to study and debate whether it is something good or not," he said. "Anything less than 60 days is not enough time to educate the public on what the issue is and to debate it."

Story said Polk Citizens for Good Government favors passage of all four amendments.

"The first one requires all county charter referendums to be conducted during the general election, to be proposed to the ballot 60 days before the general election and to have to be voted on during a general election - not a special-called election," Story said. "We think that is important because it costs somewhere between \$200,000 and \$300,000 to run a special election in Polk County."

Judy Walker with the Polk County Supervisor of Elections Office in Bartow confirmed that the cost to have a countywide special election is \$250,000 to \$300,000.

"Amendment 2 lines us up with the state of Florida concept (the state Constitution) by placing Polk County amendments for charter referendum to require at least 60 percent of the vote," Story said.

Currently, passage of a charter change requires approval of 50 percent of the voters plus 1 vote.

Amendment proposals 2 and 3 "basically say that we would like 60 percent of the voters of Polk County to approve a charter change," Story said. "We are not speaking to any specific issue; we are just saying that it ought to stand the test of 60 percent. It makes it a little harder for a special-interest group to convince 60 percent of the voters that this is a correct thing to do."

Story called proposed Amendment 4 a "no-brainer."

"Anytime a sales tax or tax increase is voted upon, it has to be held at a general election - not a specially called election," Story said. "There again, it's kind of like Amendment 1, where we should have the most voters available voting on things that are of the most importance to most of us."

Story added that with any kind of tax question to be addressed during a general election, in getting 60 percent approval, "We are pretty much assured that the voters of Polk County want it to be that way."

To educate voters on the amendments, Story said members of Polk Citizens for Good Government will visit chamber of commerce meetings and civic clubs meetings, such as those held by Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, just like political candidates do.

"In this election year, we will combine with any political forum where we can go to speak to get the message out," Story said. "Perhaps we will do some direct mailings to the voters. It will be a campaign like any political candidate or political committee goes through to get our message out to the voters."

As chairman of the committee, Story also is serving as its spokesman. "I have kind of taken this on as my thing for the next couple of months," he said. "I feel this is important."

Sam Killebrew, who served as the director of the East Polk County Committee of 100 and who volunteers with several other organizations, is the committee treasurer.

So far, the political committee has about six members, but Story said others are welcome to join.

Membership is open to anyone interested in the committee's goals and objectives. Donations are welcome, but membership is free, Story said.

Anyone interested in the group should call Story at 863-514-8002.

"I would like to make one thing real clear here," Story said. "Our committee has no purpose to, nor do we advocate, changing rules for being able to get something on the ballot."

news@newschief.com

This story appeared in print on page A1