

Challenges of Fertilizer Ordinances

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The state of Florida is experiencing a population trend that will continue to grow for years to come. This population growth necessitates the need for more paved roads, rooftops, and many expect manicured landscapes. Water quality will be a concern as the unbridled population increases. Public outcry from annual outbreaks of red tide has motivated many cities and counties to address nutrient loading in coastal waterfront communities. Local leaders responded to public concern and recognized water quality as an important and critical component of public safety, as well as of the environment. This concern has led to a number of signed resolutions establishing the local government's role and options in managing fertilizer use. It is at this juncture that careful review and research must be made in order to establish fair and reasonable actions outlining the intent of a possible ordinance. There are many pros and cons to ordinances in general, but the process to achieve the language, intent, scope, enforcement, and collective support of a fertilizer ordinance becomes the most challenging aspect.

The state of Florida is perhaps unequaled when it comes to addressing concerns of the environment alongside record-breaking growth and development. For the most part, Florida is a luxurious state. Residents expect manicured landscapes, green grass, and palm trees. Special interest groups, land developers, regulators, and politicians have their own personal ambitions, beliefs, and understandings about controlling nutrient loading in Florida's waterways. The thought of a fertilizer ordinance brings out emotions and convictions in many residents, county officials, and the industry. The task of writing a fertilizer ordinance could best be described as making a cake. If all of the ingredients are of good quality and mix together well (good communication, shared research, and reaching consensus), the end result is ideal for all. However, if one or more of the ingredients do not blend (no collaboration and/or not reaching a consensus), the end result does not represent the intent of the original goal. As a result, those involved with the creation of ordinance provisions are challenged to provide due diligence in reaching consent from all stakeholders involved. Here are some points to consider when engaging the planning process for a fertilizer ordinance.

Culture of Local Government

Government on a local level may change with any election. Personal ambition, backed by the invisible movers and shakers of the county, often controls the direction of local government. When one understands the norms from which the local leaders operate, it becomes clear as to how one communicates with them. First of all, commissioners and other local leaders must obey strict "sunshine laws" to protect the citizens from "closed door" decisions; therefore, informal group meetings are not allowed. Consequently, the chain of communication and fact-finding processes for local leaders can be very creative. Many leaders have liaisons through which trusted information is gathered or disseminated. Many of these individuals are chief/deputy administrators or general managers. So, at times, the liaison representing the official becomes an

important communication tool. Accordingly, it is often frowned upon if this communication chain is broken. Understanding the decision-making process of local leaders is just as important as understanding their attitudes toward certain issues. Depending on the philosophy and attitude of the leader or leaders, a county may decide to consult with outside professionals. Often, leaders will appoint internal task forces or outside consultants to gather information related to the decision-making process, so understanding the norms of communication is very important to how one communicates with local leaders.

Community Influence

Local leaders are the voice of the people. Remember that the voices of the people are often heard through the local organizations. Identifying those who have the ear of the local government leaders is very helpful in providing one's input. This is a very efficient process that involves little formality. Who the leaders listen to often dictates the decision made by them. An organized civic and community group's influence can be very useful in providing support and motivation to a leader's opinion.

Special Interest

Unlike communities of influence, special interest groups are "at large." These groups may operate at different levels, for example, state, regional, and local. These groups are politically savvy when it comes to influencing local leaders. Special interests usually have economic ties related to the business sector. Land developers and builders are often placed in this category due to the economic value and sensitivity of their activities to local decisions.

Exceptional groups, such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, are environmentalists who operate exclusively as a special interest group. These groups can have tremendous influence upon state legislation and local ordinance development and enforcement. These groups are just as passionate and emotionally involved as a community group. Therefore, it is important to know how organized and influential they can be to local leaders.

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Outside Consultants and Facilitators

These individuals are hired to perform functions that government staff cannot do or lack the experience to do effectively. Occasionally, high profile issues are better resolved with outside facilitation, separating the involvement of government in order to maintain neutrality. The balance of this process is often disrupted by the personal philosophy and ambition of the consultants and facilitators. This can become problematic once their personal opinions and biases begin to influence the collaborative effort of the various stakeholders. Careful consideration should be made when approaching these individuals for services, or for endorsement or approval of the findings in their area of expertise.

They Are All Stakeholders

In the end, they are all stakeholders. Stakeholders are individuals or groups that provide a collaborative function within the government decision-making process. Stakeholders—whether they are industry, community groups, or special interest groups—solidify ordinances. Proper communication to these groups is essential for feedback and awareness. Consensus by means of a collaborative process provides stakeholders with assurance that their views are acknowledged and duly noted in the final product: the ordinance.