

HUEY D. JOHNSON

The people's turn

GETTING AN initiative on the ballot is the exciting process in politics today. The initiative process is the last pure form of democracy left in the country, and one of the principal reasons the West Coast leads the nation in innovative environmental legislation.

Opponents of the initiative process are critical of the demands it puts on the voters. But because state and federal legislatures are more vulnerable to blockage than action, I say the initiative process is exactly what is needed.

Give me a public brawl over the issues instead of back room wheeling and dealing any time. The public deserves no less. It sells the voters short to assert that they're not up to the challenge.

The results have been stunning.

Californians have voted on initiatives to shield coastal areas from too much development; to set strict toxic standards to guard public health, and to open up more funding for desperately needed mass transit projects.

Oregon's use of the initiative process resulted in the creation of the nation's finest set of land-use zoning laws.

Angry Washington state environmentalists have placed an initiative on this November's ballot that would supersede a watered-down growth management bill passed by the legislature.

Crafting good laws to solve environmental problems is a distressingly tough task. And blocking them in the Legislature is too easy. More often than not, the latter is what happens when legislators are pressured by agribusiness, real estate developers, forest products and oil companies.

In response, outraged citizens can by-pass the behind-the-scenes power brokers and go directly to the people via the ballot box. Even when initiatives are voted down, the education process itself has been valuable.

It's the corporations and the trade associations that block environmental legislation that lose the most in the initiative process. When environmental groups and their allies do the drafting, standards and goals embodied in the initiatives are inevitably tougher than the ones in the bills that special interest lobbyists routinely kill in the legislature.

A CASE in point is Proposition 65, which regulates chemical manufacturing. After years of obstinacy, chemical companies took a beating at the polls and now face tougher marketing standards than any previously authored bills.

When are the trade associations

and their corporate members going to wise up and stop spending expensive lobbying time to block popularly supported legislation to protect the environment?

It should be clear to all by now that what's good for the environment is good for the economy. Listening to the howls and screams coming over the radio and television broadcasts in opposition to Propositions 128 (Big Green) and 130 (Forests Forever) it doesn't appear that enlightenment is close at hand.

Big Green is the product of environmental groups that have seen bill after bill dealing with pesticides, offshore oil drilling and carbon dioxide emissions blocked in the legislature's back rooms.

Forests Forever is a response to the realization that the timber industries were going to keep on logging the old-growth forests until the last ancient tree was felled.

I believe that both initiatives deserve our support. If they pass, they set a brilliant standard for the nation. If they lose, there is still a clear message being sent to the Legislature and more people educated on these critical issues.

There's an old saying in politics — although the end product is often good, you don't want to watch sausage or legislation being made.

THE INITIATIVE process can be messy too, and places demands on voters who have to read and think about the alternatives. But that's how it should be.

This country was built on the principle of "Government for the people and by the people." That makes our elected leaders our employees. As managers, when they don't do the job, we have to.

