

News

Supreme Court eminent domain ruling worries some in County

By PASHA CARROLL
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A Supreme Court ruling on June 23 has some Walton County residents and officials worried that private property rights are a luxury of the past.

"It is bad enough they (the government) can take your property for right-of-ways. Now they can take it for private corporations, too," Jennifer Hamilton, a Walton County resident said.

In a 5 - 4 ruling, the Supreme Court recently determined local governments could take a person's home or business for private economic development. Residents will be entitled to "just compensation" for their property, as per their Fifth Constitutional right.

But many argue that their constitutional rights are not being protected and this case will open the floodgates to larger problems.

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Walton County Attorney
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"The idea that leaves people unsettled is the idea that somebody is getting rich," Walton County Attorney David Hallman explained. "How do you reconcile that you took it (the home) away from Grandma?"

Hallman said the ruling would not impact Walton County but will have an effect on economically challenged communities.

"We are immunized at this point because the strong economic climate we live in," Hallman said.

He also said that Wal-

ton's conservative commission has historically been reluctant to use eminent domain, even in a more traditional way. The government's power of eminent domain can condemn property for public uses, such as roads and schools.

In the Supreme Court ruling, the public use was private redevelopment in New London, Conn. The ruling determined that private development would benefit the public through increasing jobs and tax revenue.

"Walton County has never taken anything by eminent domain," County Commissioner Cindy Meadows said. "I can't see it happening by this commission."

But Meadows did say she thinks the ruling is "a threat to everyone."

"To me that is un-American and borders on socialism and even communism," Meadows said about taking homes to stimulate economic development.

"Once it starts, who knows where it will lead," local property owner, Peter Lovecchio said. "I think it (the ruling) will cause a lot of trouble."

Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor issued a similar dissent to the case. She argued that local government should not have the ability to give disproportionate power and influence to large developers and corporations and leave the little guy high and dry.

She wrote, "Nothing is to prevent the state from replacing any Motel 6 with a Ritz-Carlton, any home with a shopping mall, or any farm with a factory."

"I just want to send the message that this is not the kind of thing we will be doing in this county," Meadows said.

But some locals aren't so sure.

"You never know where it is going to happen," Lovecchio said. "It could be in your own backyard."