

HOW WE SEE IT

Alcohol Heading For Ballot

The hardest part about converting Benton County from dry to wet always has been getting the issue on the ballot.

That immense hurdle was cleared Sunday afternoon, when the county clerk's office verified that Keep Dollars in Benton County had collected enough valid signatures to force an election on alcohol status.

The group needed 41,171 signatures. It submitted about 56,000 to the clerk's office earlier this month.

County Clerk Tena O'Brien and her staff had 10 days to validate all those signatures — or at least confirm that the group had collected enough valid names. The clerk's office rose to and met that challenge. Kudos to them.

Of course, we can't help but admire the determination shown by Keep Dollars in Benton County, which spent more than \$400,000 on the four-monthlong effort to collect signatures from 38 percent of registered voters. Most of that money came from Steuart and Tom Walton, grandsons of Sam Walton.

Petition campaigns are tricky things. You never know how they're going to turn out.

For example, a campaign to force an election this fall on raising the state's natural gas severance tax rate submitted 69,774 signatures — about 7,000 more than the number required to reach the ballot. The secretary of state's office, however, determined only 30 percent of the signatures to be valid. According to the secretary of state, there were multiple problems with the petitions, including numerous signatures that appeared to be in the same handwriting.

As for the Benton County wet-dry issue, it would not be a surprise to see someone challenge the legitimacy of the petitions or the ballot issue itself in an attempt to derail its momentum.

There's a lot of money at stake. A study by the University of Arkansas' Center for Business and Economic Research found making Benton County wet would have a \$33 million annual economic impact. Communities outside the county stand to lose tax dollars if Benton County goes wet.

Meanwhile, Madison County might also be voting on its alcohol status this fall. A group called Keep the Money in Madison County is working on acquiring the 3,122 signatures needed to force a wet-dry election there. Madison County is one of 40 dry counties in the state, and one of seven that doesn't allow private clubs, which can sell mixed drinks.

Madison County has not had a vote on its wetdry status in 66 years; Benton County hasn't had one in 68 years.

Our opinion is the same for both counties: It's about time to let the voters decide whether it's better to be wet or dry.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

Benton County will finally
have another chance to vote
on its wet-dry status this fall.
That's a good thing.