

Alcohol Sales Closer To Ballot

ABOUT 56,000 SIGNATURES SUBMITTED TO CLERK'S OFFICE

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BENTONVILLE — A group working since February to gather signatures to place retail alcohol sales on the November ballot submitted about 56,000 to the County Clerk's Office on Thursday.

Clerk staff spent Thursday afternoon stamping each page from four boxes of petitions and started verifying signatures.

Keep Dollars in Benton County needs 41,171 valid signatures for the issue to appear on the Nov. 6 ballot. The clerk's staff must ensure each of the signatures corresponds to a registered voter in Benton County.

If the 56,000 total stands, the group will have signatures from more people than voted in the 2010 general election. Only 53,310 cast a ballot in that election, according to the Secretary of State's Office.

The clerk has until July 23 to validate the signatures. Opposing parties have 10 days after that to challenge signatures in Circuit Court.

County Clerk Tena O'Brien said 56,000 signatures is the most she has seen at one time. The 38 percent requirement is a much higher threshold than most other ballot initiatives.

"We're taking today to see a realistic number for how many signatures one person can check," O'Brien said. "I'll see if I need to bring in additional help or look at overtime."

O'Brien said most of the office staff will be dedicated to checking signatures during the next 10 days with one staff member reserved for county business.

Marshall Ney, spokesman for Keep Dollars in Benton County, said he's confident the signatures are valid based on a review of the petitions. State law requires groups submit every signature, even if it is a duplicate. Ney said he's comfortable they have "beyond the number we need" even considering duplicate or invalid signatures.

"We can't thank our petitioners and our volunteers enough," Ney said. "They have worked tirelessly, especially in these last couple of months, to ensure that we have enough signatures to get this important issue on the ballot."

The group hired Georgia firm National Ballot Access to gather the signatures. Company representatives have been active at events and businesses around the county during the last five months. The firm charged \$364,760 for work from February through the end of May, according to financial statements submitted to the state Ethics Commission.

The effort has been paid for largely through donations from Steuart and Tom Walton along with support from convenience store chains Casey's General Store, Kum & Go and E-Z Mart. Contributions through the end of May totaled \$380,000. The group's June financial statement is due Sunday.


If 56,000 signatures are validated, the group will have signatures from 52 percent of the county's registered voters.

"I hope that a statement of support that significant, combined with the fact that we already have easy access to alcohol in Benton County, leads voters to look at the economic benefits this would have for the county," Ney said.

The group commissioned a study by the University of Arkansas' Center for Business and Economic Research that found converting Benton County to a wet county would have a \$33 million annual economic impact.



STAFF PHOTO J.S. WEDGEWORTH Betsy Harrell, deputy clerk at the Benton County Clerk's Office, file stamps petitions Thursday from the group Keep Dollars in Benton County to put the wet-dry issue on November's ballot. The group turned in 56,000 signatures and needs 41,171 to get the issue on the ballot.



ATA GLANCE
PAST ALCOHOL VOTE

The last time Benton County residents voted on alcohol sales was in the 1940s when the county population was about 38,000. The population is now about 220,000.

SOURCE: KEEP DOLLARS IN BENTON COUNTY



STAFF PHOTO J.S. WEDGEWORTH Samantha Hufford with the Benton County Clerk's Office verifies petition signatures using the Arkansas State Voter Database on Thursday in Bentonville.