

Benton County Group Forming For Wet/Dry Alcohol Vote

Benton County, long known for its myriad private club permits, could be voting to allow retail alcohol sales this November.

A local group known as "Keep Dollars in Benton County" has formed with the initial purpose of giving Benton County voters an opportunity in the upcoming Nov. 6, 2012 election to vote on whether or not retail alcohol sales should be legal in Benton County.

Currently, there are approximately 130 permits for private clubs, which allow alcohol sales in food establishments.

The "Keep Dollars in Benton County" group is led by Marshall Ney, an attorney with Mitchell Williams law firm in Rogers. Ney says that voters have not had an election on the wet/dry issue since 1944.

At the time, the county's population was around 38,000. Now it stands at nearly 220,000.

"Benton County is a growing and dynamic area, both in terms of population and economic development, and our group along with many others feel strongly that the county voters of today deserve an opportunity to make their voices heard on this issue through the democratic process," Ney said.

"There is also a compelling economic issue to be considered here, for Benton County as a whole and our individual cities, particularly given the growing importance of the hospitality industry as a key driver in our region's ongoing economic development," Ney said.

Supporters of the action have to obtain signatures of 38% of the registered voters in the county — roughly 40,000 signatures — to qualify for the ballot. The group says they have hired a professional firm, National Ballot Access (NBA), to help with the petition drive.

Keep Dollars in Benton County recently commissioned an economic impact study from the University of Arkansas' Center for Business and Economic Research to quantify the economic impact of legalizing retail alcohol sales in Benton County.

Assuming a potential \$78 million in total retail alcohol sales in Benton County in 2010, the study estimates that the direct annual economic impact of converting Benton County from dry to wet would be approximately \$22 million, and the total annual economic impact would be approximately \$33 million.

"Based on the study, there is no question that there are real and significant economic benefits that would accrue to Benton County if retail alcohol sales were legal," said Kathy Deck, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research. "This potential economic impact would include additional sales and property taxes for the county and its individual cities, the creation of new jobs and businesses, and indirect economic benefits resulting from all this new activity as well."

The full study is available on [the Center's website](#).

Keep Dollars in Benton County will be governed by an advisory committee, which includes: Kelly Billingsley Jones, a resident of Bentonville and owner of Basil's Café in Rogers; Patric Brosh, a resident of Bella Vista and owner of Romance Diamond Co. in Fayetteville; and Jerry Moyer, a community and business leader in Siloam Springs.

Additional committee members will likely be added in the future, Ney said.

BY [ROBY BROCK](#)

FEBRUARY 13TH,
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