

Group Wants Wet Benton County

By: Kyle Leyenberger

A group wants Benton County to legalize retail alcohol sales, and it's already working to get the issue on the November ballot.

People who want the change say making the county wet would mean tens of millions in added revenue, but others say the community would benefit more from keeping liquor stores across the line.

'Keep Dollars in Benton County' is collecting signatures to put the wet/dry issue to a vote, and for that to happen, 38 percent of registered voters, or nearly 40,000 people must sign the petition. Marshall Ney, a spokesman for the group says that's no easy task.

"It's a big number and it's a big effort to get all those signatures," he says.

Other groups have tried and failed to get the issue on the ballot before. Ney says the last time the issue was voted on was in 1944 and since then a lot has changed.

"We think now is a good time, with all of the growth, the growing hospitality industry and the potential for more economic activity," he says.

The group commissioned an economic study which estimates \$78 million dollars could have been rung up in retail alcohol sales for the county in 2011.

"The direct economic impact of that in Benton County would have been about \$22 million," Ney says.

The group also hired a professional firm, National Ballot Access to run the petition drive, That same firm ran a petition in boone county in 2010.

"They successfully got the signatures, it was on the ballot and it passed," Ney says.

NBA is already collecting signatures at the White Hawk Station in Rogers. Jimmy Morrison signed the petition, and says he's sick of driving across county lines to find a liquor store.

"Bout any restaurant in town you can buy a drink and sit there and drink and then you gotta drive home, but you can't get a six-pack and go home and drink it," Morrison says. "It's about the wettest dry county around."

Restaurants and other businesses in dry counties can serve alcohol if they are granted a private club liquor license from the Alcoholic Beverage Control board, and according the ABC, there are already close to 140 private clubs in the county. That puts Benton County at the top of the list for liquor permits in the state's dry counties, and in the top ten for both wet and dry counties.

But others say the county should stay dry. Hans Saunders lives in Centerterton. He drove up to Missouri to buy some spirits to celebrate the birth of his first grandchild and says he doesn't mind the drive. He believes the distance deters drunk driving.

"There's a lot of good things, economic things, but there are a lot of bad things that can come along with having a wet county," Saunders says. "Why add something into the mix that's not already there?"

Ney says his group just wants to put the question before voters in November.

"I'm not going to try to convince somebody who doesn't want a wet county to vote for a wet county," Ney says. "Everyone has the opportunity to show up at the polls and vote yes or no."