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Group against Benton County 'wet' vote (updated)

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story by Kim Souza

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The first group to organize efforts against the wet Benton County vote in November has surfaced.

Citizens United to Preserve Benton County put up a [website](#) ^[2] chock full of statistics from the 2008 Uniform Crime Reports by the state crime center. A new [Facebook](#) ^[3] page was also started on Sept. 30. There is only one "Like" on the page at this time.

Spokesman John Gore says he knows the group got a late start but they are picking up some good momentum in a very short timeframe. He said there will be statistics and other data added to the Facebook page in the next day or so.

The group hopes to raise \$35,000 as it reaches out to local churches just one month before the general election. It's going up against a well-organized effort by [Keep Dollars in Benton County](#) ^[4] that worked for months to get the issue before the voters for the first in 68 years.

Citizens United had not yet filed a campaign finance report with the Arkansas State Ethics Commission as of Tuesday (Oct. 2). Gore said the group began its grassroots efforts about three weeks ago and wants to keep the liquor and bars out of downtown.

"We want people to know all the facts before they head to the polls. Alcohol raises the crime rate and people need to know," Gore said.

The group is circulating their fact sheet with local churches in hopes of drawing both financial and voter support.

"We are getting some good feedback and cooperation with a number of local churches and plan to attend First Friday this week on the Bentonville square in addition to the International festival in Rogers. We have started an email campaign and are working to raise as much money as possible to help with an advertising blitz ahead of the election," Gore said.

Marshall Ney, an attorney with Mitchell Williams in Rogers, and spokesman for Keep Dollars in Benton County, said Tuesday his group respects there are differing opinions on the wet/dry

issue across the county.

"We are pleased that the voters will have the opportunity to have a voice on the issue," Ney said.

Keep Dollars in Benton County has the financial backing of Tom and Steuart Walton who have contributed \$475,000 to the cause. The organization has already spent \$517,937 to garner the needed signatures ^[6] to take it to the voters on Nov. 6, according to the latest campaign finance report dated Sept. 17.

At the core of the Citizens United campaign the group is saying a wet county will mean higher crime such as 35% more DUI arrests, 15% more alcohol-related fatalities, 60% more drugs and narcotic use, nearly three times the number of robberies and nearly twice the number of thefts than found in dry counties, according to the group website.

Ney said his organization does not agree with the conclusions asserted by the opposition group.

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"There are many factors that impact crime – for example, can anyone legitimately say that Little Rock's crime is higher than NWA's simply because it is located in a wet county? The opposition group's conclusions also ignore the fact that alcohol already is present in Benton County," Ney said.

Keep Dollars in Benton County says the reason they are pushing for the wet vote is because of the \$33 million annual economic impact the county is losing because its resident drive 10 minutes to neighboring counties to purchase alcohol and bring it right back across the line.

"Our main priority between now and election day is to encourage all Benton County residents to vote," Ney said. "Based on our successful signature campaign, we are confident that Benton County will be voted wet if there is a strong turn out on election day."

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