

Group Working To Make Benton County 'Wet'

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A group is working to get the Benton County wet/dry question on the Nov. 6 ballot.



Kelly Billingsley Jones in Benton County is trying to legalize retail alcohol sales in the county.

The group received initial funding from Sam Walton's grandsons Steuart and Tom Walton. Their father, Jim Walton, is on Walmart's board of directors and is chief executive officer of Arvest Bank. The initial funds are for the petition drive to get signatures of 38 percent of Benton County registered voters required to get the question on the ballot.

"As natives of this area, both my brother Tom and I are passionate about doing what we can to help Benton County and the whole region continue to thrive and develop," Steuart Walton said in a released statement. "We respect, of course, that there are differing points of view on this issue, but that is all the more reason to take this to the voters and to give our democratic process an opportunity to work."

The group hired National Ballot Access to run the petition drive. They need to collect around 40,000 certified signatures. The drive starts this week and will run through early July.

The question of making Benton County "wet" hasn't been on the ballot since 1944, when the county's population was approximately 38,000. It is now close to 220,000, according to the 2010 U.S. Census report.

Marshall Ney, an attorney with Mitchell Williams Law in Rogers, is the group's spokesman.

In order to oversee this ballot initiative, Ney said in the statement an advisory committee was formed consisting of: Kelly Billingsley Jones, Bentonville resident and owner of Basil's Café in Rogers; Patric Brosh, Bella Vista resident and owner of Romance Diamond Co. in Fayetteville; and Jerry Moye, a community and business leader in Siloam Springs. Additional committee members will likely be added in the future, 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

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importance of the hospitality industry as a key driver in our region's ongoing economic development," he said in the statement.

Keep Dollars in Benton County recently commissioned an economic impact study from the University of Arkansas' Center for Business and Economic Research to help scientifically quantify the economic impact of legalizing retail alcohol sales in Benton County. The study drew population information from the most recent U.S. Census data in 2010 and also considered applicable retail alcohol sales data from other "wet" areas in the state of Arkansas.

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 wet to dry would be approximately \$22 million, and the total annual economic impact would be approximately \$33 million, according to the report.

The full study is available at cber.uark.edu/.

About Christie Swanson

Christie Swanson covers business for NWA Media's local daily newspapers and NWAonline.com. In her nearly 20-year career, she's covered everything from local sports to international retailing giant Wal-Mart. Christie also spent six years as managing editor of the Northwest Arkansas Times in Fayetteville. She is a graduate of the University of South Dakota and a loyal fan of her home state Iowa Hawkeyes.

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