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Walton brothers backing Benton County alcohol vote

Gwen Moritz

Walton family money is backing an effort to put the question of making Benton County "wet" on the November general election ballot.

A local group called Keep Dollars in Benton County has hired a professional company to collect the approximately 40,000 signatures needed. Funding for the initial petition drive has been provided by brothers Tom Walton of Houston and Steuart Walton of London, who are the sons of Jim Walton and grandsons of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton.

Becoming a wet county would allow package liquor stores to operate within Benton County and would allow for-profit restaurants to seek licenses to serve alcoholic beverages to the public.

Under state law, the signatures of 38 percent of registered voters in the county must be collected in order to place a wet-dry question before voters. (All other direct initiatives require signatures from only 15 percent of voters.)

Marshall Ney, an attorney with the Mitchell Williams law firm in Rogers, is serving as spokesman of Keep Dollars in Benton County. It will be the fourth countywide wet-dry election attempted in Arkansas since the signature hurdle was raised to 38 percent; Marion County voted itself wet in 2006, and Clark and Boone counties voted themselves wet in 2010.

If the petition drive is successful, it will be the first time Benton County residents have voted on the question since 1944, when its population was about 38,000, according to Ney. With a current population of 220,000, proponents of the initiative will now need to collect about 40,000 signatures.

"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 in a press release.

"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."

Keep Dollars in Benton County commissioned an economic impact student from the University of Arkansas Center for Business & Economic Research. The study found that converting Benton County from dry to wet would be approximately \$22 million, and the total annual economic impact would be approximately \$33 million.

The full study is available on the Center's website: CBER.UArk.edu.

Members of the Keep Dollars in Benton County advisory committee are Kelly Billingsley Jones, a resident of Bentonville and owner of Basil's Cafe in Rogers; Patric Brosh, a resident of Bella Vista 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.

The Walton brothers, who grew up in Benton County, put up the money to hire National Ballot Access of Atlanta to execute the petition drive. Ney declined to release the cost of the petition drive.

"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 the press release. "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."

Information from: Arkansas Business, <http://www.arkansasbusiness.com>

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