



A group hoping to seek voter approval of converting Benton County to a “wet” county — open for retail alcohol sales — says the law change could generate a \$33 million annual economic impact.

“Keep Dollars in Benton County” rolled out its plan Monday (Feb. 13) to have a wet-dry question on the November general election ballot. Initial funding for the effort comes from Steuart and Tom Walton, grandchildren of Wal-Mart founders Helen and Sam Walton.

Marshall Ney, an attorney with Mitchell Williams Law in Rogers, said much has changed since 1944 when the question was last presented to Benton County voters. In 1944, the population of Benton County was approximately 38,000, and now stands at 220,000.

In order to place the wet/dry issue on the November ballot, by state law, 38% of registered voters in Benton County must sign a legal petition confirming their desire to bring the matter to a vote. Ney said about 40,000 certified signatures are required.

Keep Dollars in Benton County has hired National Ballot Access (NBA) to gather signatures needed to place the question on the November ballot. Signatures are submitted to the Benton County Clerk for verification.

Citing figures from an economic impact report from the Sam M. Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas, Ney said there is a “compelling economic issue” behind the push for a law change.

“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 the [group's press release](#).

The Walton College report (Link [here for a PDF](#) of the 14-page report.) included the following notes on economic impact.

- If Benton County had been a wet county in 2010, residents would have spent an estimated \$44,724,993 in beer purchases and \$33,273,288 in liquor and wine sales. The total package alcohol sales would have amounted to an estimated \$77,998,281.
- In 2010, those retail sales of alcohol would have generated an additional 2.4 percent in sales tax revenues for Benton County or \$779,983.
- Total city sales taxes collected from the sales of retail liquor in Benton County would have amounted to \$1,402,076 in 2010, with the majority occurring in Rogers and Bentonville.
- Property taxes on new construction of package liquor stores will also generate ongoing revenue streams. In

2010, these impacts would have ranged from \$120,679 to \$160,906 and would have been split among cities, counties, and school districts.

- Using economic multipliers and inter-industry coefficients to estimate economic impact, the economic impact of allowing retail sales of alcohol was estimated at \$33,044,913 for the year 2010.
- This economic activity in Benton County in 2010 would have been associated with a total of 541.8 jobs (across all industries) with a labor income of \$15,453,091.
- In addition to ongoing economic impact, if 21 new liquor stores had been constructed, a one-time economic output of \$14,337,891 would be generated and a total of 141.1 jobs would be created across all industries in Benton County.



“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,” Kathy Deck, director of the Walton College’s Center for Business and Economic Research, said in a statement. “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.”

An advisory committee 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 Moye, a community and business leader in Siloam Springs.

Lawrenceville, Ga.-based NBA managed the signature collection for successful similar initiatives during the 2012 election in Boone County and Clark County. Eddie Baggett, president of NBA, has previously said her company charges \$1 per signature.

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NBA, formed in 2007, has been the target of claims of fraud in the signature-gathering process by the [Progressive States Network](#) and [Stop Ballot Fraud](#). In 2008, Oklahoma Secretary of State M. Susan Savage noted that signatures gathered by NBA included “an unprecedented situation where large numbers of duplicate names and addresses” made it almost impossible for state officials to cull all duplicates.

Michael Langley, head of the Arkansas Beverage Control Board, said in [a 2009 interview](#) that Arkansas’ liquor law “has a clear bias” to keep counties dry, citing the rule that to change a counties wet/dry status

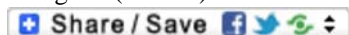
requires signatures from 38% of the number of people who voted in the county's recent general election. With churches and adjacent county liquor store owners eager to protect their borders and booze sales, respectively, it's nigh impossible to hit the 38% mark.

"This is my opinion, but that's on there to protect the status quo; to protect dry counties and to protect county-line liquor stores," Langley explained.

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