

Marriage, land initiatives lack signatures

To get the issues on the November ballot, more registered voters must be found by Feb. 1.

By STEVE BOUSQUET, Tallahassee Bureau Chief

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TALLAHASSEE - Two controversial citizens initiatives aimed at outlawing same-sex marriage and limiting growth in Florida have each collected thousands fewer signatures than originally reported, potentially thwarting their place on the November ballot.

What's more, supporters of both proposals, who have been collecting signatures for years, are running out of time. They have until Feb. 1 to collect and get verified 611,009 signatures of registered voters, geographically balanced among Florida's congressional districts.

Florida4Marriage.org, which is pushing the ban on same sex marriage, is 22,000 voter signatures short of what it needs, state officials said Monday. Florida Hometown Democracy, which is pushing to require local referenda for changes to local land use plans, is about 110,000 signatures short.

Both groups say they have thousands of petitions sitting in local elections offices awaiting verification. But they are at the mercy of the state's 67 elections supervisors, who have another major priority: preparing for the Jan. 29 presidential primary and statewide vote on property tax changes.

Hometown Democracy's Ross Burnaman, a Tallahassee lawyer, said, "It's a lot lower than we thought it would be. We're disappointed, but still guardedly optimistic." He said

if his group falls short, all of its signatures would still be valid for the 2010 ballot because petitions are valid for four years from the date they were signed.

Michael Caputo of Floridians for Smarter Growth, a group opposed to Hometown Democracy, said the battle for and against signatures is now largely confined to four congressional districts in Miami and Fort Lauderdale and Jacksonville.

"We're down to the wire and both of us have run out of time," Caputo said.

The so-called marriage protection campaign faced a unique dilemma: It had already declared victory for ballot position, but the state said more than 20,000 petitions collected in Miami-Dade in 2006 were mistakenly counted twice by the county elections office.

"We're not interested in pointing fingers at this point," said campaign director John Stemberger, an Orlando lawyer. "We're at the mercy of the professionalism and competency of the officials involved. If every supervisor counts every petition, I feel very confident we'll get there."

It's not unusual for voters to sign a petition more than once, but only one signature counts.

Secretary of State Kurt Browning last week abruptly changed the method of recording signature totals, in part because he said he was not fully confident in the accuracy of some county totals.

The new numbers add an element of suspense to the two campaigns because the state does not plan to release updated signature totals before the Feb. 1 deadline. Getting a precise daily count would require contacting all 67 local election supervisors.

Both initiatives have attracted popular support, as well as organized opposition gearing for a full-blown political campaign this year. Hometown Democracy sparked an effort by business groups to persuade voters to revoke their signatures from petitions under a new law. But state figures show that only 4,738 voters have revoked their signatures.

Steve Bousquet can be reached at bousquet@sptimes.com or 850 224-7263.

FLORIDA HOMETOWN DEMOCRACY

Referenda Required for Adoption and Amendment of Local Government Comprehensive Land Use Plans

Reference: Article II, Section 7 of Florida Constitution

Summary: Establishes that before a local government may adopt a new comprehensive land use plan, or amend a comprehensive land use plan, the proposed plan or amendment shall be subject to vote of the electors of the local government by referendum, following preparation by the local planning agency, consideration by the governing body and notice. Provides definitions.

FLORIDA4MARRIAGE.ORG

Florida Marriage Protection Amendment

Reference: Article I of Florida Constitution

Summary: This amendment protects marriage as the legal union of only one man and one woman as husband and wife and provides that no other legal union that is treated as marriage or the substantial equivalent thereof shall be valid or recognized.

For more information: <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/initiatives/initiativelist.asp> and search for each group's name.

Source: Florida Division of Elections