

The News Tribune

April 15, 2004
Kenneth P. Vogel

Initiatives have early momentum; November: Four committees have raised \$130,000-plus

If early signs are any indication, this year's ballot initiative campaigns could be lively.

Four initiative committees this week reported raising more than \$ 130,000 each - a sign that the measures they're supporting have a legitimate shot at appearing on the November ballot.

The committees are asking voters to open car-pool lanes to general traffic during off-peak hours, boost the sales tax to raise \$ 1 billion for education, slash local property taxes, and replace state property taxes with revenues generated by expanding gambling.

Some other campaigns that haven't reported raising much money show signs of strong grass-roots support, like the Washington State Grange's effort to replace Gov. Gary Locke's new primary election system.

But politicians often measure the viability of initiative campaigns - like they do with candidates - by their fund-raising ability. With some exceptions, it can cost \$ 350,000 to \$ 800,000 to shepherd an initiative into law, say seasoned campaign workers, particularly if backers rely on paid signature-gathering to qualify for the ballot.

Unlike with contributions to candidates, there's no limit on how much an individual or company can give to an initiative campaign.

Investor Nicolas Hanauer and a law firm co-owned by Locke ally Bill Marler contributed \$ 125,000 of the \$ 146,000 raised by the committee backing the education sales-tax initiative, I-884, which Locke supports.

Bellevue shopping mall owner F. Kemper Freeman Jr.'s company contributed \$ 168,500 of the \$ 180,500 raised by the committee pushing the car-pool lane initiative, I-883.

Those initiatives and the two tax-slashing measures, both of which are sponsored by anti-tax activist Tim Eyman, have either hired or plan to pay signature-gathering companies. So does Breathe Easy, Washington, the Tacoma-based group pushing an initiative to enact a comprehensive, statewide indoor smoking ban like the one in Pierce County.

"It's definitely a busy year and might be a good time to be a signature-gatherer," said Brett Bader, a Republican political consultant and veteran of more than a dozen initiative campaigns.

He's working on the car-pool lane initiative, which would fund billions in road projects as well as open car-pool lanes during off-peak hours.

"It's a giant job," said Bader, whose consulting firm has received \$ 58,000 from Let's Get Washington Moving, the political committee supporting I-883. The committee also paid \$ 40,000 to another consulting firm and spent \$ 30,000 on legal fees.

But Eyman, the Mukilteo watch salesman who is the state's reigning initiative king, said money only goes so far.

"It helps, but it doesn't determine your success or failure," Eyman said. "Only your idea does."

Still, even a good idea can be difficult to get on the ballot. Backers must collect 197,734 signatures of registered voters by July 2, though in reality they need thousands more to protect against duplicate and fraudulent signatures. And there are inevitable legal challenges to controversial initiatives.

The political committee Breathe Easy, Washington aims to raise \$ 500,000 as part of its effort to get its smoking ban, I-890, on the ballot.

There's already plenty of public support for a smoking ban, said Breathe Easy spokesman Scott Peterson. He said his group, which reported raising more than \$ 30,000 in March, has pledged for at least another \$ 125,000 in April. That money is necessary to pay campaign overhead such as staff salaries and to hire the Tacoma-based signature-gathering company owned by Sherry Bockwinkel, Peterson said, because the group probably wouldn't have time to collect enough signatures.

Bockwinkel won't be able to hit the streets to collect signatures for I-890 until at least Friday, when a Thurston County judge will hear a challenge to its ballot title from the Entertainment Industry Coalition.

The Olympia-based coalition, which predicts I-890 would hurt its member bars, restaurants, minicasinios, bowling centers and other businesses, is sponsoring a rival initiative, I-891. It would implement a more limited smoking ban that would still allow smoking in bars, minicasinios and other age-restricted venues.

The coalition won't hire paid signature-gatherers, said executive director Linda Matson, and will rely instead on a statewide network of business owners and employees to collect signatures.

"We don't have a spare half-million dollars," Matson said. "We have 2,000 locations across the state, 110,000 employees and millions of customers, and they are what makes us competitive."

The Grange, through a separate committee supporting its primary election initiative, I-872, also plans to use only volunteer signature-gatherers, according to spokesman David Burr.

Though it hasn't started printing petitions, it's already aired radio ads supporting the idea. And Burr said "we're getting tons of calls - lots of people requesting petitions."

Regardless of how much grass-roots support a given initiative has, Matson, a first-time initiative leader, predicted a daunting task collecting the signatures exclusively with volunteers.

"All the pros tell me we're nuts - that there's no way that we can get it done," Matson said. "This is going to be a true test of stamina."

- - -

Kenneth P. Vogel: 360-754-6093
ken.vogel@mail.tribnet.com

- - -

SIDEBAR: Eight initiatives with a shot at November ballot
Selected ballot initiatives that have committees raising money to support them or plan to soon:

I-864: Slash some local property taxes by 25 percent
Sponsor: Tim Eyman

Committee supporting it: Voters Want More Choices, which raised \$ 135,400

Committee opposing it: Taxpayers for Washington's Future, which raised \$ 10,400

I-872: Replace the state's new primary election system with a system that advances the top two vote-getters, regardless of party affiliation

Sponsor: Terry Hunt, president of the Washington State Grange

Committee supporting it: Citizens Preserving Voter's Choice, which has not yet filed a finance report

I-881: Exempt prepared food, including food sold in restaurants as well as soft drinks and dietary supplements, from sales taxes

Sponsor: John Mills, a leader in the Washington State Libertarian Party, acting on behalf of the party

Committee supporting it: Liberty and Justice for All, which raised \$ 2,800

I-883: Reduce traffic congestion in a variety of ways, including opening car-pool lanes to all traffic during off-peak hours and selling \$ 10 billion in bonds for road construction

Sponsor: Richard Patten

Committee supporting it: Let's Get Washington Moving, which raised \$ 180,500

I-884: Increase the sales tax by 1 percentage point to raise \$ 1 billion for education

Sponsor: Lisa Macfarlane, president of the League of Education Voters, acting on behalf of the league

Committee supporting it: Citizens for the Education Trust Fund, which raised \$ 145,800

Committee opposing it: League of Freedom Voters, which raised \$ 2,400

I-890: Enact a comprehensive statewide indoor smoking ban

Sponsor: Patty Carlson, a Seattle-area bartender, acting on behalf of Breathe Easy, Washington

Committee supporting it: Breathe Easy, Washington, which raised more than \$ 30,000

I-891: Enact a more limited statewide smoking ban that would allow smoking in bars, minicasinos and other nontribal businesses that don't admit minors

Sponsor: Michael Matson, acting on behalf of the Entertainment Industry Coalition

Committee supporting it: A not-yet-formed committee to be run by coalition director Linda Matson

I-892: Allow nontribal businesses to operate video lottery terminals and use the resulting tax revenue to offset a reduction in the state portion of the property tax

Sponsor: Tim Eyman

Committee supporting it: Just Treat Us the Same, which raised \$ 158,500

All figures - except those for Breathe Easy, Washington - from state Public Disclosure Commission reports covering through March 31.

- Kenneth P. Vogel, The News Tribune