

HOOD RIVER NEWS

Development vote appears headed for ballot

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A citizen's coalition has gathered over 1,400 signatures – over three times the required number – to place a watershed protection measure on Hood River County's Nov. 4 ballot.

About 20 people gathered Wednesday to present the signatures to Lee Schissler, county elections supervisor.

The measure needs 418 signatures in order to qualify for the ballot. In an unusual step, Schissler met the group in front of the county's Dean Building, where his office recently relocated from the courthouse.

"We have 15 days to verify the signatures. It will probably be done a lot sooner than that," Schissler told the group. "It appears that you will be able to qualify pretty easily." On Thursday, Schissler explained: "Unless there is some bizarre problem with the way they collected signatures, anyone who got 1,400 signatures for a county ballot would have to have blown it not to qualify."

Elections staff spent the day Thursday comparing the petition signatures to those on voter registrations.

Let the People Decide PAC representatives say the measure would give county voters the right to approve any major housing development in zoned forestlands. The measure defines major developments as those with 25 or more residential units.

Schissler said the measure will be known as 14-15. The title will read: "Requires voter approval of residential developments on certain forest lands," and asks, "Shall voter approval be required for residential development consisting of 25 units or more if sited on forest lands."

"This shows that people care passionately about democracy, water and watersheds and Mt. Hood," said Jurgen Hess, a PAC member.

Hess called it "a tremendous effort" with about 100 people gathering 1,421 signatures in six weeks.

"That's what grass-roots democracy is all about," he said. "We're very excited about the public support for this measure," said Wendy Gray, who lives on a Hood River Valley farm and is one of the initiative's chief petitioners. "Simply put, this measure would give people the right to vote on the future of Hood River County's water supply. Water is critical, people deserve the right to vote on major developments potentially threatening our ability to successfully farm, as well as have safe drinking water. This measure will protect our agricultural way of life – a backbone of the County's economy."

Dr. Rod Krehbiel, also a chief petitioner, agrees.

"The only way you can be afraid of this initiative is if you're afraid of democracy. If someone wants to put up hundreds of houses and a golf course in our watershed then it's just common sense that the people relying on that watershed should have the final say."

"This measure will be an important tool for protecting water quality, but it will also be an important tool for protecting our pocketbooks," said Tom Penchoen, the third initiative chief petitioner. "If housing developments contaminate the water supply with sewage runoff or chemicals put on a golf course then water users are going to be stuck with the multimillion dollar bill to filter the water so it's safe to drink. This initiative will let the people decide whether that type of development is worth the cost."

"I'm proud to be in a community that takes its water seriously," Penchoen said. "All over the country and the world people have not taken water seriously. This is an issue that's exceptionally important in the next few years."

Supporters said the measure goes beyond proposed development at Mt. Hood Meadows. The initiative would give citizens the right to have their voices heard when it comes to major housing developments in forestland watersheds throughout the County.