

# Petitioners seeking change to Jackson charter, government



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At Ray's Food Place in Phoenix, Annie Toliver signs a petition Tuesday proffered by Dasja Dolan of the group Jackson County For All. The group is seeking to place three measures on the May ballot that rewrite the Jackson County charter.

By Casey Valentine of the Daily Courier

PHOENIX — At Ray's Food Place on Tuesday, Cheryl Steyaert came in for groceries but found herself talking a little politics first.

Members of a grassroots group called Jackson County For All were canvassing outside the store, seeking signatures to place three measures on the May primary ballot that will rewrite the Jackson County charter.

After some discussion, Steyaert signed. The measures expand the county Board of Commissioners from three to five seats, reduce pay for commissioners, and make the seats nonpartisan.

"Politicians need to get it together. Nothing is getting done," Steyaert said. "We need to change something."

Facing a deadline of Feb. 21 to make the ballot, organizers of Jackson County For All say they already have enough signatures to qualify but are seeking 2,000 more to ensure a cushion.

Campaign manager Denise Krause said the charter rewrite isn't a referendum on the job being done by the current commissioners but is about representation.



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At Ray's Food Place in Phoenix, Annie Toliver signs a petition Tuesday proffered by Dasja Dolan of the group Jackson County For All. The group is seeking to place three measures on the May ballot that rewrite the Jackson County charter.

"This is about a system that has been in place for 170 years, and our population has changed greatly since the commission was formed in 1853," she said.

Based on the number of signatures collected to date, residents of Jackson County seem to agree with Krause. Since September, the group has collected approximately 8,500 signatures of the 10,500 it wants to gather.

The county clerk's office requires 8,351 verified signatures to get each of the three measures on the ballot.

"The 10,500 includes a buffer, we wanted to make sure we had enough," Krause explained. "We thought it would take longer to get the necessary signatures, but people have been so amazing and so receptive."

Originally, the group was planning to have the measures on the November ballot, but because of the overwhelming response, the group is looking to have the measures on the May ballot.

"People are rushing to sign this. There are so many people that are discontent, so many people haven't felt heard, so many haven't felt represented," said Krause

The first measure seeks to make the commissioner positions nonpartisan. Currently, the commissioner positions are partisan, while every other elected office in Jackson County, such as sheriff and district attorney, is nonpartisan.

Republicans slightly outnumber Democrats in Jackson County, but nonaffiliated voters outnumber both — and are unable to vote in closed primaries.

"They can't vote, they don't have anyone representing them," Krause said.

The second measure increases the number of commissioners from three to five. Jackson County has had three commissioners on the board since being established in 1853, when, according to the 1860 census, the population for the area was less than 4,000 people. The current population is estimated at 223,734.

The third measure would effectively decrease the salaries of the commissioners by dividing the current salaries over five commissioners instead of just three. Jackson County commissioners are among the highest paid in Oregon and make more than Oregon's governor, with two commissioners earning over \$130,000 annually and one earning over \$118,000 annually.

Other shoppers signing the petitions Tuesday said they could see merit in the rewrite effort.

"I'm willing to try something new, anything to get things done better," said Annie Toliver.

"It's a good idea," said Nick Teney.

Jackson County For All is not the only group trying to change the way local government is run. In Josephine County, a group called Citizens for Responsible Government gathered enough signatures to place a similar charter rewrite on the May ballot.

Known as Measure 17-116, it also expands the county commission from three seats to five, reduces commissioner pay, and adds a professionally trained county manager paid from savings from reducing the commissioner salaries.

The Josephine County proposal also enshrines that all county elected offices are nonpartisan, including the commissioners.

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