

LAWMAKERS TO AIR COMPLAINTS ABOUT MARRIAGE PETITION DRIVE: [THIRD EDITION]

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

A legislative committee announced yesterday that it will hold a hearing on reports of bait-and-switch tactics in the collection of signatures for a proposed ban on same-sex marriage, amid mounting complaints from voters that they were tricked into signing, or nearly signing, petitions.

In another development, the Massachusetts Food Association, which is circulating the petitions to allow beer and wine sales in super markets, said yesterday it has refused to accept hundreds of signatures gathered by individuals who were also collecting signatures for the gay-marriage question.

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FULL TEXT

A legislative committee announced yesterday that it will hold a hearing on reports of bait-and-switch tactics in the collection of signatures for a proposed ban on same-sex marriage, amid mounting complaints from voters that they were tricked into signing, or nearly signing, petitions.

The Joint Committee on Election Laws has scheduled an Oct. 18 hearing to look into the accusations, according to the two committee chairmen, Senator Edward M. Augustus Jr. and Representative Anthony W. Petrucci, who said they are responding to a public outcry about people being duped into putting their names on something they didn't support.

Several gay-rights groups have solicited and compiled such complaints. Some voters have written letters to the editor in local newspapers, while others have contacted the Globe and other media directly.

Most of the complaints fit the same pattern: Shoppers at supermarkets and stores such as Wal-Mart say that after signing a separate petition to allow beer and wine sales in grocery stores, they were asked to sign the gay-marriage measure with little or sometimes no explanation.

In another development, the Massachusetts Food Association, which is circulating the petitions to allow beer and wine sales in super markets, said yesterday it has refused to accept hundreds of signatures gathered by individuals who were also collecting signatures for the gay-marriage question.

Christopher P. Flynn, the group's president, said that his organization had received several complaints from supermarket customers that they were the targets of bait-and-switch tactics by signature gatherers. He said the

complaints increased last week.

"I have no reason to believe it is a widespread problem," Flynn said. "We have responded aggressively, and we are hearing fewer complaints from our members."

The coalition behind the gay- marriage petition and proponents of the alcohol sales measure have hired private firms to help them collect names, and those firms subcontract the collection work. Flynn said that the firm his group had contracted should not have allowed independent subcontractors carry petitions for additional groups.

Corey Welford, a spokesman for Attorney General Thomas F. Reilly, said Reilly's office has fielded roughly a dozen calls from residents complaining of bait-and- switch tactics. A civil investigator, Nicholas Paras, has been assigned to track complaints, Welford said.

Augustus and Petruccelli, both of whom backed gay marriage when a separate measure came before the Legislature last month, are targeting paid signature- gatherers who are paid for each name they collect.

Augustus said he hopes the hearing will include testimony from voters who feel they were the target of such tactics. In addition, he said, he hopes to hear from the companies collecting the signatures.

"Perhaps everything is flawless out there and no one with a profit motive is doing anything illegal, but it seems to me that if there are these press reports around the state and all this other evidence, let's look into it," said Augustus, a Worcester Democrat.

Kris Mineau president of the Massachusetts Family Institute, a group helping lead the gay- marriage petition effort said the organization has heard of only a handful of allegations of irregularities.

He said he was confident that the firm it has hired, California- based Arno Political Consultants, and its subcontractors were doing everything right.

"We've worked with them very thoroughly," he said.

In order to get their question on the 2008 ballot, gay-marriage opponents need to first get nearly 66,000 signatures of registered voters by Thanksgiving. Then the signatures must be certified by the municipal clerks where the voters reside and by the secretary of state's office.

Mineau said gay-marriage opponents have collected tens of thousands of signatures, including those gathered this past Sunday at churches across Massachusetts.

Gay-rights advocates say bait-and-switch tactics were rampant in 2001, when same-sex marriage opponents were gathering names for what was ultimately an un successful constitutional amendment.

Tom Lang director of knowthyneighbor.org, a group that supports equal marriage rights said the complaints could form the basis for a formal challenge to some of the signatures, once they're filed with the secretary of state's office.

Knowthyneighbor.org also plans to post the names of all signers, to make sure no voter is on the petitions unwittingly.

Meanwhile, Focus on the Family, a Colorado-based conservative Christian organization, sent a letter to Massachusetts supporters last week asking them to raise more than \$100,000 in the next 45 days to get the gay-marriage ban on the ballot.

"Massachusetts is on the front line in the battle for marriage," said the letter from James C. Dobson, founder and chairman of Focus on the Family.

MassEquality, a group working to preserve gay marriage rights, criticized Dobson's letter.

"Our opponents promised a citizen-driven, grass-roots campaign," Marty Rouse, campaign director for MassEquality, said in a statement. "Instead we find the biggest far-right group in the nation raising money to pay signature-gatherers who have come from out of state."

Mineau responded that Focus on the Family belongs to their local coalition.

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