



# Discussion Topic

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A monthly resource for the Community Action Groups of Michigan Farm Bureau

## QUESTIONS

1. What direction should Farm Bureau policy makers take to reform the process of ballot initiatives?
2. How can county Farm Bureaus make sure local voices are heard about ballot proposals?
3. How can you stop special interest groups - many with anti-farming agendas - from buying their way onto the ballot?

## Look ahead for changes in the ballot initiative process

Two ballot initiatives will face voters this November, but one that didn't make it just might be a hot topic for debate as delegates make Michigan Farm Bureau policy this year at the State Annual Meeting.

The package of bills, Senate Joint Resolution K, introduced by Sen. Michelle McManus, would "reform the initiative and referendum petition process by requiring a broader base for signature gathering, modify filing deadlines and alter residency requirements for petition circulators."

The package is supported by Michigan Farm Bureau's legislative committee and public policy staff as a way to stop deep-pocketed special interest groups from buying their way onto the ballot, said Tonia Ritter, manager of Farm Bureau's State Governmental Affairs Department.

"Farm Bureau has no direct policy on this, but it seems to me that the question the package brings up is whether Michigan has required true representation of the voting population when initiatives are allowed to be put on the ballot through paid petitioners," she said. "We can fight bad policy when it's on the ballot, but maybe we should look at how it gets there in the first place."

During the past 20 years, according to Bob LaBrant, senior vice-president and legal counsel with the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, nearly every proposal that has made it to voters has gotten there because of paid petitioners. Any group with enough money can pay a petitioner for each signature he or she collects from a registered voter.

"Since we've created this petition management industry, people are like carnival workers," LaBrant said. "They travel from state to state collecting signatures, and they can make a livelihood from it. The point is that if you have enough money, you can guarantee yourself a spot on the ballot."

The practice, Ritter said, means that, for example, a petitioner can go to Detroit, where population is concentrated, and get enough signatures to prompt a ballot initiative that has no effect on Detroit. Besides that, LaBrant said, only 8 percent of the number of people who voted in the last gubernatorial election are required to sign to put the question on the ballot. For referendums on recalls of elected officials, it's only 5 percent. That means if 100 people voted in the last Governor's election, only 5 signatures would be required to get a recall proposal on the ballot.

The issue is particularly sensitive to farmers, since in other states, ballot



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proposals have succeeded in ending use of gestation crates for hogs, destroying at least one state's hog industry.

"The anti-farming community has an agenda, and they're quite adept at using these rules to their advantage," Ritter said. "They count on waning voter participation and misinformation campaigns, and they can push their agenda, essentially, by buying their way onto the ballot." That puts less well-funded ballot initiatives at a serious disadvantage, LaBrant said.

"Some groups have no money, but every year they try to make headway on some Don Quixote mission, but they don't have the money to amass enough volunteers to get the required signatures," he said. "But if you have enough money, you can guarantee it."

Ritter said she believes an initiative like Senate Joint Resolution K is needed to ensure that voters find ballot proposals even-handed, and because it requires that a referendum proposal have distribution of signatures from registered voters in three-fourths of the House districts in the state.

"We have no direct policy on this," Ritter said. "I think we need some kind of direction, because the issue will continue to be contentious."