

Chris Dorworth, pro-con: Do petition-gatherers need more regulation? Yes

We need to keep bad guys away from the Florida Constitution

By BY STATE REP. CHRIS DORWORTH Guest columnist

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Not all industries in Florida are suffering during this tough economy. In fact, the petition signature-gathering business is booming.

In Florida, we pride ourselves on having an open government, where all aspects of lawmaking are available for public scrutiny. But when it comes to amending our constitution, anyone from anywhere is able to put just about anything into it.

Florida has one of the easiest constitutions in the country to amend. Of the 24 states that allow citizen initiative petitions, we are one of only four that have no regulations on ethical behavior, age or residency requirements, or other basic protections for voters. The Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., hub for progressive ballot initiative campaigns across the country, recommends that paid petition circulators be required to register with the secretary of state, the list of registrants should be public information, and that individuals who have been convicted of certain crimes should be restricted from gathering petitions.

House Bill 497 will implement those recommendations and provide training for paid petition gatherers, and will prohibit petition gatherers from being paid on a per signature basis. This legislation will keep voters' personal information out of the hands of convicted felons and ensure that people working to amend the Florida Constitution are properly regulated to help protect against fraudulent behavior.

Some will argue that the state constitution already is too hard to amend. I would argue we can never be too cautious when amending our most sacred governing document. Today, we prohibit individuals from being paid based on the number of voter registrations they collect, because the risk of fraud is too great. Why should initiative petitions be treated any differently?

We also require lobbyists to register with the state, identify who is paying them, and report how much they are getting paid. We do this to ensure transparency and accountability from the people who are being paid to influence our lawmakers. Why shouldn't we expect the same level of accountability from the people who are being paid to amend the Florida Constitution?

In fact, we request identifying information from recreational fishermen in Florida. To suggest that requesting the same type information from a paid signature gatherer is

somehow too burdensome on our initiative process is laughable, and displays the extent to which the special interests who abuse this process are willing to go to protect business as usual.

As it stands, any person, corporation or organization can come into Florida and have direct influence over our constitution simply by paying individuals to gather petition signatures. What was designed as a grassroots tool for greater citizen participation has become an industry dominated by special-interest money with little public oversight.

Florida cannot afford for another special-interest group to buy onto the ballot and into our constitution. After pregnant pigs and bullet trains, what's next? I hope that Florida doesn't find out. This legislation will make great strides to protect citizens from fraudulent petition gatherers in this state, add a layer of accountability to the process of amending our constitution, and further protect our democratic process.

Rep. Chris Dorworth is a second-term Republican from Lake Mary.



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