

Written by Administrator  
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GRAND RAPIDS — A group hoping to add seven new privately-run casinos in Michigan — including one in Grand Rapids — has received permission from the state Board of Canvassers to start gathering signatures in support of the projects.

Now Michigan is

Yours, the group launching the petition, needs to gather about 320,000 signatures by July 7 to make next November's statewide ballot.

Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell said the time may be right for a casino in the city.

"I am not a fan of casinos, but I'm a fan of Grand Rapids and I feel like, just from a defensive posture, if we've got casinos popping up all around us, we may have to have one here in Grand Rapids."

Heartwell said he knew nothing about the Michigan is Yours plan or those involved, but he said the city needs to be pragmatic about the possibility of a casino.

The group fell short last year in its petition drive to add a similar question to the 2010 November ballot. At that time, the list included Muskegon and Port Huron as new casino locations, not Grand Rapids.

This time, Lansing, Detroit, Romulus, Benton Harbor, Saginaw and Mount Clemens are the other communities included on ballot initiative petition. Muskegon and Port Huron were deleted.

The petition was approved "as to form" by the state Board of Canvassers in December. The board only reviews technical aspects of petition forms and does not review petition language.

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Al Night, who said he was a Las Vegas-based consultant working for Michigan is Yours, said the petition was changed to include Grand Rapids at the request of West Michigan developers.

“A couple of businessmen asked why they would put Muskegon on there and not Grand Rapids,” said Night, who declined to name the businessmen. “The idea was to enhance the tourism and convention business for the select cities.”

The proposed constitutional amendment, obtained by The Press from the Secretary of State’s office, would hand control over selection of developers of the casinos to C-My Casino Inc., a company registered in 2009 with the address of Michael Greiner, a Warren-based attorney.

The amendment language says the casinos would be subject to a 19 percent wagering tax on their adjusted gross receipts.

That money would be dispersed as follows:

- 20 percent would go to fund the Pure Michigan advertising campaign
- 38 percent would fund the Michigan Promise Scholarship program
- 27 percent would go to local units of government where casinos are located
- Remaining funds would go to the School Aid Fund.

Night said he is working with David “Chief” Tomby, a Detroit-area businessman who previously announced The Xanadu Plan, which called for redevelopment around Detroit City Airport and a casino to be built on top of Detroit’s Cobo Center.

Night said the proposal has the backing of University of Nevada-Las Vegas professor Bill Thompson, who advocates casinos as an economic development tool.

Reached by phone, Thompson said he hoped to be under contract with the group, but was not officially on board yet.

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Thompson, an Ann Arbor native and former Western Michigan University professor, said Detroit's casino developments haven't worked because they do little to draw outside money to the city and they were built as islands far away from other Detroit amenities.

"Casinos may not be great draws for tourists from the outside coming in, however they can be catalysts for developments which can enhance tourism," Thompson said.

The failed 2010 ballot initiative had been led by Detroit businessman Frank Stella, who died in September, and Benton Harbor Mayor Wilce Cooke.

Stella was listed as the only contributor to Michigan is Yours in documents filed with the Secretary of State after last year's petition drive failed to garner enough signatures.

Cooke could not be reached for comment.

Night said this year's attempt is better organized and will make greater use of the Internet and direct mail to get petitions into voters' hands.

He said a news conference is expected to be held in a couple weeks to kick off the petition campaign. He declined to say how much would be spent, or who would be paying the bills.

Former Lions star and Heisman trophy winner Billy Sims has been linked to the group; attempts to reach Sims were unsuccessful.

Grand Rapids businessman Peter Secchia said he had spoken to Stella "a year or two ago" about the proposal, but has no interest in the ballot initiative.

Secchia, who actively opposed efforts to build the Gun Lake Casino in Allegan County, said he

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would only support a Grand Rapids casino if it was publicly owned, locally controlled and taxed, with profits being used to benefit the local community.

Secchia thinks the petition drive may be dead on arrival, given the likely opposition it would face from Detroit's three casinos and tribal casinos around the state.

"The existing casinos will invest \$40 million, \$50 million, \$80 million if they need to to defeat it," he said. "It ain't gonna happen."

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