

Kromko helps build steam to blow away gaming law

By TOM SHIELDS
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John Kromko, one of the key people behind the Indians' referendum to block the Legislature's new law outlawing casino gaming, says 15,000 "definite" signatures have already been gathered.



Kromko

And the drive is only three weeks old. "We're definitely going to make it," Kromko said.

Moreover, thousands of petitions are being circulated and it's difficult to tell just how many more signatures have been obtained. Kromko, a former Democratic legislator from Tucson who is regarded as an expert in running referendums, said he hasn't seen this much demand for petitions in 20 years, since an old controversy over a sales tax.

The tribes need 52,771 signatures by June 2 to stop Senate Bill 1001 from becoming law, and as a cushion they hope to get about 70,000 signatures, he said. The bill was passed on March 4.

"There's a lot of sympathy for the Indians, even from people who don't like gambling," said Kromko. "There's a lot of bad feeling about Fife not going along with the mediator (former Arizona Supreme Court Justice Frank X. Gordon) after he had agreed to."

Doug Cole, a spokesman for Republican Gov. Fife Symington, said,

'There's a lot of sympathy for the Indians, even from people who don't like gambling.'

— John Kromko
Supports referendum

"We're in favor of letting the people speak.

"Obviously, we're in favor of Senate Bill 1001 because it helps our legal stand and in slowing the (gaming) train that's moving down the track without any say by the state," he continued.

Cole said he wasn't surprised that Kromko and the tribes already had 15,000 signatures.

Cole said the governor's office is working on a daily basis with Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and may forge a compromise to which the tribes can agree. Then, Cole said, the Legislature can go back and change the new law to go along with the agreement.

The referendum drive is financed by Arizona's tribes. All 21 of them have coordinators. "Everybody is involved," Kromko said. "Fife has provided more tribal unity than the tribes ever could have provided for themselves. We've got tribes who didn't talk to each other meeting in the same room. It's wonderful."

In addition, a few paid circulators have been hired, "just in case we fall short with the volunteers," he said.

Part of the drive involves voter registration. Many Native Americans are being registered for the first time, not only so they can sign the petition but also so they can vote for it if it appears on the November 1994 ballot, he said.

In Tucson and Phoenix most of the available voter registration forms have been used, making it necessary to have more printed, Kromko said.

"This is going to hurt Fife a lot on the reservations," he said. "Thousands of voters are going to be picked up here." Symington is expected to be running for re-election on the same 1994 ballot.

Some tribal leaders, including those representing the White Mountain Apaches and Pascua Yaqui, are saying they plan to register everyone on their reservations.

"This (gaming) really means a lot to the tribes, like the Tohono O'odham and the Yaqui," Kromko said. "This is a bread-and-butter issue for them. They're going door to door."

In Tucson, signatures are being collected at Veterans of Foreign Wars halls, Rotary clubs, Moose clubs, charity organizations, bingo halls, the University of Arizona and Pima Community College. Soon, Kromko said, petitions will be circulated in the city's shopping malls.

Kromko and Luis Gonzales, a former state senator from Tucson, are coordinating the petition drive in southern Arizona.