

BOSTON (AP) — They have almost no money, scant political support and no legal way, at the moment, to do the very thing their group exists to accomplish.

But casino opponents trying to overturn the law that legalized three casinos and a slot parlor in Massachusetts fight on, convinced victory is still possible.

“We look to stories of our faith and remember battles when David can beat Goliath,” said the Rev. Laura Everett, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches.

Casino opposition is organized into a group called Repeal the Casino Deal. Last weekend, it started gathering the roughly 69,000 signatures needed to put a question overturning the law on the November 2014 ballot. Even if the group gets the needed signatures within the two-month deadline, the efforts could die in court.

That’s because Attorney General Martha Coakley ruled their ballot question unconstitutional. Casino opponents have appealed, but if they lose, it won’t matter if they’ve gathered a million signatures, the fight is over.

Brian Ashmankas, a Millbury selectman who’s organizing the signature drive, said the long odds aren’t relevant to him.

“We’re on the right side of this,” he said.

The state’s 2011 casino law created up to three casino licenses and a slots parlor license. Proponents promise a host of benefits, including thousands of jobs and new economic activity in places that badly need it.

But opponents say casinos siphon money by the millions from local businesses to support an

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industry that harms families and increases crime.

Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone believes his fellow Democrats, including Gov. Deval Patrick, made an “historic mistake” passing the casino bill, and voters deserve a chance to undo it.

“You do not build communities with casinos,” Curtatone said. “Casinos polarize consumers and take money off Main Street with the lure that you’ll win big on Easy Street.”

The opposition melds diverse ideologies, from liberals such as Curtatone to conservative groups like the Massachusetts Family Institute.

“We’ve agreed to disagree on the other issues,” said Kris Mineau of the institute. “We’re Christians, and Jesus said if you can agree with your adversary, do so quickly.”

Among the hurdles for casino opponents, Coakley’s ruling is the biggest.

In her Sept. 4 decision, Coakley said applicants for a casino license — who pay an initial \$400,000 fee — have “implied contracts” with the Massachusetts Gaming Commission and those contracts are considered property. So a ban on casinos or a slots parlor would be an unconstitutional taking of property.

Casino opponents say Coakley’s opinion defies legal precedent. But their appeal to the Supreme Judicial Court won’t be heard until after the Nov. 20 deadline for collecting signatures, so they have to collect them and hope for a favorable ruling.

State Rep. Robert Koczera, a New Bedford Democrat and casino proponent, said casinos are simply capturing business that’s leaving the state. He believes that even if the question reaches the ballot, casino opponents are “fighting a lost cause.”

Opponents dismiss the substantial economic benefits of casinos only because they're wearing ideological blinders, and most voters don't share their views, he said.

"You're talking about thousands of jobs, so I fail to see where it's not a win-win," Koczera said.

Tim Vercellotti of the Western New England University Polling Institute said it's unlikely public sentiment has changed much since statewide polls taken before the law's passage, which showed about half of respondents favoring casinos and a third opposed.

Those opinions were formed in a debate that preceded the law by years, and nothing dramatic has happened since to change people minds, Vercellotti said.

"I haven't seen the argument yet that gets (casino opponents) the traction they need," he said.

Lazarus Morrison, a 31-year-old Web developer from Somerville, has volunteered to collect signatures for the repeal and is convinced support for casinos will drop as voters get educated about them.

Repeal the Casino Deal can't pay professional signature gatherers, and Morrison admits he could use the advice. His plan for now is to hit high-traffic areas, including an upcoming local farmers market and festival. He'll be armed with \$30 worth of anti-casino buttons and certainty that fighting this long-shot battle is worth it.

"I think it's that important," Morrison said.

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