

York County casino bid fails to qualify for Maine's November ballot

Written by Administrator
Wednesday, 02 March 2016 21:04 -

AUGUSTA — A campaign to give a controversial gambling figure the sole right to build a York County casino failed to qualify for the November ballot, according to the Secretary of State.

Maine election officials said the Horseracing Jobs Fairness campaign submitted 91,294 signatures on Feb. 1. Of those, only 35,518 were deemed valid signatures.

The campaign needed 61,123 signatures to qualify for the ballot.

Secretary of State Mark Dunlap indicated Wednesday that his office may ask the Office of Attorney General to review some of the irregularities found in the campaign's signature gathering effort, but said his office would likely wait to see if the campaign appealed the findings. The campaign has 10 days to appeal the certification decision, which would be reviewed by Maine Superior Court.

"We're not equipped to make a judgment if this is criminal activity," Dunlap said. "Some of the biggest swaths of invalid signatures were people who weren't registered to vote. Some of the technical problems that were fairly serious in our view were around the circulators' oaths. It was clear just by looking at the documents that somebody had a stack of petitions and somebody was just notarizing them."

Maine law says that a petition circulator must sign an affidavit before a public notary swearing that he or she personally witnessed the act of signing. The notaries are responsible for determining that the circulator is who they say claim to be. Dunlap said there many instances in which a notary's signature didn't match the one the state had on file.

"The bottom line here is that we don't look for reasons to disqualify signatures," he said. "We're looking to verify that they were made properly."

Dunlap said his office is confident that its decision will survive an appeal.

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Election officials found that 32,526 signatures were invalid because the circulator's signature on the circulator's oath, or the signature of the notary listed as having administered the oath, did not match the signature on file. Of those, 16,096 signatures are invalid because they were not certified by the registrar as belonging to a registered voter in that municipality where the signature was submitted.

The casino proposal came under scrutiny because of an aggressive signature-collection drive to qualify for the ballot. The campaign, Horseracing Jobs Fairness, submitted its petitions to the Secretary of State's Office at deadline, following a signature gathering effort that raised questions in some quarters about whether Maine needs to tighten and reform its referendum law. Had it been approved, the proposal would have allowed Las Vegas gambling impresario Shawn Scott – and only Scott – to build the casino.

Scott's sister, Lisa Scott, financed the campaign, which at one point was paying petition circulators between \$7 and \$10 per signature during an aggressive push to qualify for the ballot. The campaign produced a number of complaints from voters about aggressive tactics, and more recently, petition circulators have complained that they haven't been paid.

Early indications suggested that the campaign would have some difficulty qualifying. Secretary of State Matt Dunlap said last month that there had been widespread reports from municipal clerks about shoddy work and duplicate signatures on petitions. In early February, the Bangor city clerk reported that of 6,869 signatures gathered in Bangor, only 2,913 appeared to be from registered city voters. The rest were invalid.

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