

Saving TIME

Important measure must overcome signature woes

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The Arizona Republic

The initiative to deal with Arizona's transportation problems has hit an unfortunate roadblock: The Secretary of State's Office says petitions for the TIME measure don't have enough valid signatures.

Let's hope this is just a detour to the November ballot.

Otherwise, with falling gas-tax revenues and rising construction costs, Arizona is on the road to a transportation crisis.

Supporters of the initiative are optimistic that they can show that enough of the invalidated signatures and petitions actually pass muster to qualify for the ballot.

Voters should have a chance to play catch-up with our transportation challenges. And maybe even get ahead of the game for once.

TIME stands for Transportation and Infrastructure Moving Arizona's Economy, and the name is right on target.

Although Arizona has hit a slow patch, we're still looking at almost doubling our

population, to 12 million, by 2040. We'll need more and better ways to move around.

TIME would use a 1-cent-per-dollar increase in the sales tax to pump \$42.6 billion into transportation projects over 30 years. That's a double economic shot in the arm: three decades of construction, plus the savings, in both time and money, of better mobility.

Without the extra funding, we've got a huge and growing financial gap.

Arizona hasn't raised its gas tax, a major source of state transportation funding, since 1991. Highway-construction costs have jumped as much as 50 percent in the past five years. Meanwhile, our roads are aging and need more repair. Except for Maricopa and Pima counties, which have their own earmarked taxes, by 2015, most of the state will have only enough transportation dollars to maintain existing roadways.

The TIME initiative would pay for a well-balanced mix of projects: 58 percent for highways, 18 percent for rail and transit, 20 percent for local projects and 4 percent for biking and pedestrian needs.

The plan calls for widening Arizona's critically important interstate highways. It would add high-speed rail connections for commuters, enhance bus service and step

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up transit for the elderly, people with disabilities, and tribal communities in rural areas.

It makes better links throughout Arizona.

The actual tax wouldn't begin until 2010, giving local transportation-planning organizations the opportunity to work out details of their projects.

This important measure should have been put on the ballot by legislators, the clean, easy way of putting it before voters. But lawmakers stalled and balked. When supporters, including Gov. Janet Napolitano and business groups, chose the initiative route, only a few months were left before petitions were due. The last-minute rush may explain how so many of the 261,000 signatures, 42 percent based on the official sampling, were invalidated.

There was also a complicated dustup with a home builders association, leading the TIME committee to reject 18,000 signatures the group submitted. In hindsight, those petitions might have avoided the potential disqualification of the initiative.

Arizona has started a crucial discussion about our transportation requirements and resources. If this measure doesn't end up going to the voters, another one surely will.

Fortunately, we may not have to wait.

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