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FEATURED

Anti-annexation petition expected to fall short of signature goal

BY JACOB SANCHEZ | TELEGRAM STAFF 14 hrs ago



BELTON – The petition effort to end involuntary annexation in Bell County began on a cold December night with light snow flurries. Now, six months later in the burgeoning days of summer, that petition is on its deathbed.

Empower Bell County Texans – the anti-annexation group spurred by the city of Belton’s annexation efforts in late 2017 – projected earlier this month that it would fall short of its goal of 20,000 signatures to call for an election on whether the county should opt into a law restricting cities’ annexation powers.

The Bell County residents had until Thursday to complete their petition.

In March, the group told the Telegram they had gathered between 5,000 and 6,000 signatures.

“Although we do not project that we reached our goal of 20,000 signatures, we will not have an exact count until all forms have been turned in,” Empower Bell County Texans chairman Amy Cook said in a Facebook post on May 4.

Cook did not respond to a request to comment on Wednesday.

The group’s goal exceeds the minimum signatures established by Senate Bill 6, the law restricting annexation. The measure requires cities to seek the consent of property owners before annexing their land. The law only affects cities in counties with populations greater than 500,000.

Counties like Bell County that fall short of that threshold can opt into the law. Residents must gather signatures from 10 percent of registered voters to call for a countywide referendum.

Empower Bell County Texas needed at least 18,663 signatures before the Commissioners Court could place the proposal on the November ballot. Aug. 20 is the last day for a measure to be placed on the general election ballot.

Despite the measure-placing deadline, the group’s petition forms are only valid for 180 days. The group received their forms from the Bell County Clerk’s office in December.

A similar effort in Parker County, west of Fort Worth, successfully gathered enough signatures to place an annexation measure on the general election ballot.

As the petition drive ends, Cook told supporters on Facebook that the focus should not be on the number of signatures, but rather on how the group fostered civic engagement in Bell County.

“We had a steep discovery learning curve and the desire to effect positive change,” Cook said. “Although we expect to fall short of the goal of 20,000 signatures, we encourage continued engagement with city-, county- and state-elected officials to protect individual property rights.”

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