

# Belton Council to attend resident-organized annexation forum

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Councilmen Dan Kirkley, left, Paul Sanderford, Mayor Marion Grayson and Mayor pro tem Craig Pearson listen to Bell County residents on Tuesday as they protest Belton’s proposed annexation of 1,358 acres. Richard Creed/Special to the Telegram

BELTON — The City Council will attend a mid-November forum organized by Bell County residents to discuss Belton’s proposed annexation of up to 1,358 acres.

“We believe we will have enough for a quorum to have the meeting ... as an official meeting of the city on Nov. 16,” City Clerk Amy Casey said, adding that because it is an off-day for the City Council some members may have prior commitments to which they must attend.

The on-site annexation forum, which was organized by county resident Amy Cook, will be at 5:30 p.m. Nov. 16 at the Church of God the Firstborn, 126 Frances Lane.

“There will not be time limits so all voices can be heard,” Cook said during the final annexation hearing on Tuesday. “To put it plainly: we have made the choice to have an on-site hearing and the City Council can attend or ignore the event. With or without you, the event will be held.”

In Texas, cities are legally required to hold two public hearings on annexation. Belton held its annexation hearings on Tuesday and Oct. 24.

Initially, Cook planned to hold the forum on Nov. 14 — the same day the Belton City Council convenes for a regular meeting. But after being informed about the already scheduled meeting, Cook told the City Council that the forum could be held two days later.

Last week, Cook successfully petitioned Belton to hold a hearing in annexation area two.

However, the city could not get in contact with Church of God the Firstborn to begin a discussion on whether the site meets requirements set by the American Disability Act and if it can hold at least 100 people. Casey contacted the church three times last week, according to a timeline of contacts provided by Belton spokesman Paul Romer.

Cook was already preparing for the chance of Belton officials not attending her forum.

“If they don’t show up, we’re going to use that time to organize ourselves for a countywide petition,” Cook said to the Telegram Wednesday.

Cook acknowledged that Belton will continue to pursue its annexation effort, which she described as “un-Texan” and “un-American.”

“This public hearing may appear to be the last step in the process, but it is only the beginning of our efforts to accomplish three goals: Stop your annexation of our land. If unsuccessful, immediately pursue disannexation of our land. And, third, put a countywide referendum (on the ballot) to end forced annexation,” Cook said on Tuesday.

A new law, set to go into effect on Dec. 1, restricts cities’ annexation powers in counties with more than 500,000 people. Residents who live in proposed annexation areas would vote on whether they want to join a city.

But smaller counties, like Bell County, can opt in if 10 percent of registered voters sign a petition calling for an election to follow the law.

It is likely to be an uphill battle for Bell County residents to gather at least 18,394 signatures — which is 10 percent of the current 183,935 total registered voters here.

Once the petition is submitted to Bell County and validated, the Commissioners Court will call for an election to opt into the law. When that election will be held is unclear because the law does not provide a clear date.

Cook said she has been in contact with Parker County residents who, according to the Weatherford Democrat, were able to stop Weatherford’s proposed annexation of their land in September.

Parker County residents hope to collect about 10,000 signatures to call for a countywide election in November 2018 on opting in to the new law, the Democrat reported on Sept. 13.

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