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**LOCAL GROUP INITIATES PROCESS  
TO GIVE CITIZENS OPPORTUNITY TO VOTE  
ON WHETHER BENTON COUNTY IS 'WET' OR 'DRY'**  
*Petition drive will begin this week through early July*

**BENTON COUNTY, ARK. (FEB. 13, 2012)** – A local group has formed with the initial purpose of giving Benton County voters an opportunity in the upcoming Nov. 6, 2012, election to vote on whether or not retail alcohol sales should be legal in Benton County.

The group, Keep Dollars in Benton County, is working to give Benton County residents the opportunity to vote on whether or not the county should be “wet” or “dry,” an action that hasn’t been taken since 1944 when voters were last heard on this issue, said group spokesman Marshall Ney, an attorney with Mitchell Williams Law in Rogers. Since 1944, when the population of Benton County was approximately 38,000, much has changed in the county with today’s population at 220,000 and growing, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

In order to place the wet/dry issue on the November ballot, by state law, 38 percent of registered voters in Benton County must sign a legal petition confirming their desire to bring the matter to a vote. In order to achieve this, the Keep Dollars in Benton County group has retained the services of a professional firm, National Ballot Access (NBA), to execute the petition drive. Beginning now and for the next several months, NBA will be at various locations in Benton County asking registered voters to sign petitions authorizing the placement of this issue on the November ballot.

All the signatures will ultimately be submitted to the Benton County Clerk for verification that they are from registered voters in the county. Once the required number of signatures are gathered and certified by the County Clerk, the issue may then be placed on the ballot for the November 2012 election. Based on the most recent counts of registered voters in Benton County, NBA will need to collect approximately 40,000 certified signatures, Ney said.

“Benton County is a growing and dynamic area, both in terms of population and economic development, and our group along with many others feel strongly that the county voters of today deserve an opportunity to make their voices heard on this issue through the democratic process,” Ney said.

“There is also a compelling economic issue to be considered here, for Benton County as a whole and our individual cities, particularly given the growing importance of the hospitality industry as a key driver in our region’s ongoing economic development,” Ney said.

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Keep Dollars in Benton County recently commissioned an economic impact study from the University of Arkansas' Center for Business and Economic Research to help scientifically quantify the economic impact of legalizing retail alcohol sales in Benton County. The study drew population information from the most recent U.S. Census data in 2010 and also considered applicable retail alcohol sales data from other "wet" areas in the state of Arkansas.

Assuming a potential \$78 million in total retail alcohol sales in Benton County in 2010, the study estimates that the direct annual economic impact of converting Benton County from dry to wet would be approximately \$22 million, and the total annual economic impact would be approximately \$33 million.

"Based on the study, there is no question that there are real and significant economic benefits that would accrue to Benton County if retail alcohol sales were legal," said Kathy Deck, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research. "This potential economic impact would include additional sales and property taxes for the county and its individual cities, the creation of new jobs and businesses, and indirect economic benefits resulting from all this new activity as well."

The full study is available on the Center's website: <http://cber.uark.edu/>

In order to oversee this ballot initiative, Ney said an advisory committee has been formed consisting of business and community leaders from throughout the region. The committee currently includes Kelly Billingsley Jones, a resident of Bentonville and owner of Basil's Café in Rogers; Patric Brosh, a resident of Bella Vista and owner of Romance Diamond Co. in Fayetteville; and Jerry Moye, a community and business leader in Siloam Springs. Additional committee members will likely be added in the future, Ney said.

The initial funding for the petition drive phase of the ballot initiative has been provided by Stuart and Tom Walton, both of whom grew up in Bentonville and have been involved in numerous economic and community development projects in Benton County and throughout the region.

"As natives of this area, both my brother Tom and I are passionate about doing what we can to help Benton County and the whole region continue to thrive and develop," Stuart Walton said. "We respect, of course, that there are differing points of view on this issue, but that is all the more reason to take this to the voters and to give our democratic process an opportunity to work."