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Gay marriage referendum battle heats up in Washington state

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NCR Today

The lead organization in the campaign to reverse Washington state's recent same-sex marriage legislation has mounted a signature-tally monitor on its website to keep supporters -- and opponents -- up to date on the effort to submit roughly 120,500 validated signatures on Referendum 74 to the state by a June 6 deadline.

The signature count stood at about 51,500 on Thursday.

"The latest projections are that we are on pace to reach 150,000 signatures" by the deadline, said Chris Pante, Preserve Marriage Washington's deputy campaign manager.

Pante said all signatures to date had been secured by volunteers. The campaign did not anticipate "engaging paid signature-gatherers," but the possibility "has not been ruled out completely," he said.

Meanwhile, Referendum 74 opponents have also established websites and Facebook pages. Washington United for Marriage is fundraising, promoting events and providing background materials on its site.

Catholics For Marriage Equality Washington State is doing much the same on its Facebook page and plans to have a website established by mid-May.

CFMEWA spokesperson John Morefield wrote in an email that organization members "will be marching behind a 10-foot banner in the gay pride parade in Seattle" on June 24 and that "we will be collecting 1,000 or more signatures of Catholics who support marriage equality to run full-page ads in *The Seattle Times*

, *The Spokesman-Review*, etc."

Morefield said his group had been "contacted by Mormons for Marriage Equality who want to work with us" and that CFMEWA is "linked and working with Catholics for Marriage Equality in Maine, Minnesota, Maryland and more."

The organization sharply criticizes state church leaders who have endorsed the Referendum 74 campaign.

"We are very disappointed with our bishops' position on the marriage equality law," the group states in a letter issued last month. "The bishops of Washington State are threatening the very fabric of the Gospel by excluding a few of our neighbors, brothers, sisters and children. The message of Jesus is love and inclusion. We know the hierarchy can do better."

That letter came shortly after Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain and Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo Almaguer sent a 1,000-word letter to parishes encouraging them to support Referendum 74 signature-gathering efforts.

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"Marriage between a man and a woman is the foundation of our society," Sartain and Almaguer wrote in their letter, adding: "It is important that you understand that same-sex couples in registered domestic partnerships in our state already enjoy the rights and privileges of married couples."

Preserve Marriage Washington's Pante said he was "on loan" from the National Organization for Marriage to help direct the referendum campaign.

NOM, the Family Policy Institute of Washington "as well as others are bringing assets and abilities to the campaign," he said.

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