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Washington state same-sex marriage battle appears headed to November vote

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NCR Today

Opponents and proponents of a referendum aimed at reversing Washington state's same-sex marriage legislation are shifting gears to focus on a November ballot initiative fight even before Referendum 74 has been officially declared qualified for the fall election date.

On Friday, the primary campaign organization behind Referendum 74 -- Preserve Marriage Washington -- reported on its website that 175,437 signatures had been gathered. The legal minimum to qualify for the November ballot is 120,577.

"We will blow through 180,000 today, I am sure," Chris Plante, Preserve Marriage Washington's deputy campaign manager, said Friday.

"When all is said and done, we will probably clock more than 200,000," Plante told *NCR*.

The organization plans to deliver the signature-bearing petitions to the Washington secretary of state's office in the state capitol of Olympia on Wednesday, the deadline for submitting referendum signatures. A press conference is planned to mark the event at that time, Plante said.

He said the state signature validation process "takes about a week," noting that his organization's "in-house validation rate is running about 85 percent."

Plante said "only grass roots" signatures are being reported on the Preserve Marriage Washington website but the group had "contracted a professional signature gatherer four or five weeks ago to accrue another 25,000 to 30,000 as a kind of guarantee."

While Referendum 74 opponents are conceding that the initiative against same-sex marriage appears headed to voters, they are underscoring the results of a May poll of Washington residents that shows a significant majority back same-sex marriage.

The November ballot measure will ask voters if they want to reject or accept SB6239, the legislation that legalized same-sex marriage in the state.

According to a news release from Washington United for Marriage, the poll was carried out for The Associated Press and reported that state "voters approve of the law by a 54-33 percent margin."

"This poll shows that an overwhelming majority of Washington voters agree that their lesbian and gay friends, co-workers and family members should have the freedom to marry," said Zach Silk, campaign manager for Washington United for Marriage, in the news release.

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"Our opponents are out-of-step with Washington values, but thanks to their paid signature operation, they'll turn in huge numbers and succeed in putting the law on November's ballot," he said in the release. "And we know that what lies ahead is a campaign designed to frighten and confuse voters."

Catholics for Marriage Equality Washington State is also calling followers of its Facebook page to join efforts to retain the state's same-sex marriage status.

The group's spokesman, 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.

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

The Catholic church's role in the Referendum 74 campaign made headlines when Seattle's 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.

Some parishes, including Seattle's St. James Cathedral, declined to allow signature-collection efforts.

"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."

Plante echoed their argument: "The opposition will want to frame their message in terms of civil rights and fairness, but it is not about that. Gays and lesbians have the right to live as they choose, but not the right to redefine marriage for the rest of us. What is at stake here is the importance of marriage in our society."

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