

TEMPLE DAILY TELEGRAM

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SUNDAY, March 25, 2018

Serving Central Texas since 1907

Vol. 111, No. 127

50¢ | \$1.00 Sunday



Still tied

TC, McLennan split doubleheader to remain deadlocked atop conference

— Page 1D

COMING MONDAY

At Temple High School, student athletic trainers help keep athletes safe and healthy at games, practices, and in walk-in clinics before classes



Ready for Easter

Egg hunts offered across Central Texas

— Page 1E

Today's Outlook

High: 83

Low: 66

20% chance of t-storms



BELL COUNTY

Signatures gathered for anti-annexation effort

BY JACOB SANCHEZ
TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

BELTON — The group circulating a petition in an attempt to end involuntary annexation in Bell County has gathered between 5,000 and 6,000 signatures, according to the group's leader.

Empower Bell County Texas, the anti-annexation group spurred by the city of Belton's annexation in late

2017, is seeking 20,000 signatures to call for an election on whether the county should opt into a law restricting cities' annexation powers.

"I would say it's going well," Empower Bell County Texas leader Amy Cook said of the petition drive. "We have about 60 days left and we have enough forms out there that have enough for the 18,000 or so signatures."

The group hopes to collect

20,000 signatures by May.

That goal exceeds the minimum signatures set by Senate Bill 6, the law restricting annexation. The measure, which was authored by New Braunfels Republican state Sen. Donna Campbell, requires cities to seek the consent of property owners before annexing their land. The law only affects cities in counties with a population greater than 500,000.

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

Bell County had 186,626 registered voters as of the March 6 primary elections. Empower Bell County Texas needs at least 18,663 signatures.

If enough signatures are

gathered, the petition would be verified by Bell County Elections Department. Elections Administrator Melinda Luedecke will have 30 days to validate the signatures.

Once validated, the petition will head to the Bell County Commissioners Court. The four commissioners and Bell County Judge Jon Burrows will then place a countywide election on the proposal for the Nov. 6 election.

The petition forms are only valid for 180 days, Cook said. Because of that, the group set May as its deadline.

The group is shifting its signature-collection strategy. Since it started gathering signatures in December, the group had tables at events. Now, Cook said, it has petition forms at 38 businesses across Bell County.

Please see ANNEXATION, 3A

Annexation

Continued from 1A

“That model is working really well,” she said. “What we’re doing right now is a letter writing campaign. We’re writing to the registered voters ... and contacting them and encouraging them to sign the petition. We’ve tried a couple of different things and that’s what we’re working on right now. We’re trying different strategies.”

Empower Bell County Texas has little more than a month to gather about 15,000 signatures to hit its goal. That number may seem daunting, but Cook is keeping her head up and staying positive.

“I remain hopeful,” she said. “I do think there is a possibility that we won’t get all the signatures we need unless everybody turns out and signs the petition now. Every signature makes a difference.”

A similar effort in Parker County, west of Fort Worth, successfully gathered enough signatures to place a referendum on the November ballot, the Weatherford Democrat reported on March 5. That petition received more than 12,000 signatures, exceeding the 8,927 needed.

“I think if we don’t make our goal, it will probably take another round of the city (Belton) annexing some property

for another group of citizens to go, ‘Oh, I missed my opportunity and I should have done something,’ Cook said. “I will tell you that at the end of the day, even if we don’t make the goal, I personally will know I will have done everything humanly possible to get there.”

Cook described SB 6 as being purposely written to make the opt-in process difficult.

State Rep. Hugh Shine, R-

Temple, said in February the law’s required number of signatures is unreasonably high.

Annexation is likely a topic lawmakers will tackle when they convene for the 86th Legislature on Jan. 8, 2019.

“If we don’t make it this year, we can do it again next year — assuming the Legislature doesn’t automatically make the law apply to all counties,” Cook said.

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