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FEATURED

KCB City Hall petition drive gains traction

By RICHARD TAMBORRINO Special to The Citizen
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1 of 2



Cheryl Foster, wife of Key Colony Beach Commissioner Freddie Foster, signs the petition.

Photos by Richard Tamborrino

The group opposing a City Hall rebuild, Concerned in KCB, conducted a “Petition Party” at Inch Beach in Key Colony Beach on Saturday, Aug. 5, with many residents

coming out to sign petitions supporting the movement to prohibit the city from taking any action on a City Hall rebuild until enough signatures are secured to request a referendum vote. The group recently filed a temporary injunction to petition the courts for that.

Word-of-mouth communication led to the “signing party,” where group leader Laurie Swanson and others welcomed dozens of supporters to “fight City Hall and stop runaway Commissioners (Tom) Harding, Vice Mayor Beth Ramsay Vickery and Mayor Patti Trefry in their quest to ignore resident sentiment and rebuild City Hall.”

The group is adamant that it doesn’t matter if residents want to rebuild City Hall, build a new complex or something else entirely. The petition simply instructs the City Commission to let residents vote on it.

Seventy petition signings were secured during the four-hour gathering, which is less than half of what’s required. However, the turnout represented almost half of the registered voters who are in the Keys now, as many are snowbirds who can mail in their signed petitions before the middle of September.

The group needs signed petitions from 25% of KCB’s registered voters, which numbers less than 700. They have until approximately Sept. 18 to hand in the petitions to the city for referendum consideration.

The group is confident they will secure well over 200 petitions from KCB voters and unofficial petitions from KCB property owners. But residents speculate that the city may attempt to thwart the group’s efforts, either bureaucratically or based on petition completion technicalities, like signatures that don’t match the voter rolls or lapsed voter registration status.

An example of city impediments involved the petition forms that City Attorney

Dirk Smits initially supplied for this action. The city-supplied petition had language in it that labeled this “an amendment to the City of Key Colony Beach Code,” which it is not.

The city then communicated that they expected the group to “handwrite the ballot issue on every sheet of 200 or more petitions,” said Swanson. “And we hadn’t even requested the petition yet.”

The group amended that supplied form to address the goal of the petition drive more accurately, so it matched the requirements of the ordinance and resubmitted it to the city.

Any resident can request a city petition form. On Friday, July 28, Swanson asked City Clerk Silvia Gransee for 500 “petition blanks” for the referendum. The request was very specific, right down to the language of the petition itself. Smits then proposed another version to replace the one he had improperly drafted initially. While not significantly different, Swanson saw that it was “still non-compliant.”

Whether the city and Smits are simply unfamiliar with the appropriate language and process for this type of petition or if intentional stonewalling is occurring to prevent the group’s success is unclear.

Key Colony Beach never put a vote on rebuilding City Hall up for referendum, which they had no requirement to do. However, the three-commissioner majority has demonstrated for months it wouldn’t allow a small pool of bidders, a hefty price tag nor the amplified rancor among dissenting residents to sway their plans for a rebuild.

Monroe County Supervisor of Elections Joyce Griffin said by phone she was aware of the KCB situation but added that the city “needs to update their city code because it’s so old” and that KCB cannot mandate her office to stage an election.

“I support the rights of everyone,” City Administrator Dave Turner said, adding “In the end, I work for the commission as they set policy. I run daily operations and implement policy the commission has set.”

In KCB’s code, city ordinance names the city clerk as its “supervisor of elections” and is structured so City Clerk Silvia Gransee can run an election from beginning to end. However, Gransee would then be expected to check the petition signatures against voter registration signatures to confirm they match. But Griffin’s office maintains those signature files, and Gransee doesn’t have access to those files. Griffin said she offered to check petition signatures for the city at 10 cents apiece.

Griffin also said KCB has already missed the qualifying date for a possible November vote and that Dec. 19 is the qualifying deadline for March 2024, which would likely aid the group since many more resident voters are typically in KCB at that time of year.

If enough petitions are received for a referendum vote, the city would conduct its own election.

The petition forms the group is using explicitly invoke Florida election law. And while the city code disallows “early voting,” it states that all elections follow the state election code, which includes votes by mail.

Residents Dave and Lea Ruesch, 18-year KCB residents who came out Saturday to sign their petitions, said they were “motivated to sign because of our frustration” with the whole situation. They said the whole process “should be decided by the voters, the people who’ll end up paying for it.” They added that Mayor Trefry has “visions of grandeur” that don’t align with the small community.

Swanson said while the petition process has been challenging, it’s continuing, with

canvassers approaching condo residents this week. She added, “We have people talking to people. My telephone is ringing with people asking how, where and when they can get a petition. It is truly amazing. We have no doubt that we will have enough signatures.”

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