

51st state ballot issue is a plea for representation

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Better representation—not secession—say Phillips County commissioners concerning the 51st state ballot issue.

Voters of this county will see Phillips County Referendum 1A on the Nov. 5 ballot that asks if the local commissioners, with commissioners from other Colorado counties, should pursue becoming the 51st state of the United States.

Speaking to various groups in the community, the commissioners explained why the question is on the ballot and clarified their reasoning.

Feeling that rural Colorado is no longer being heard in the state legislature, the commissioners see the need to change the course they're on in order to obtain a real voice in government.

Weld County commissioners initiated discussion with other northeast Colorado counties in June. They proposed the most dramatic option—secession.

Phillips County administrator Randy Schafer said he kept thinking that there had to be a better way.

Now dubbed the Phillips County Plan, Schafer came up with an idea for different representation at the state level.

He pointed out that 12 of the 65 members of the Colorado House of Representatives can be considered rural representatives and six of the 35 senators represent the rural populace.

Schafer's proposal models the U.S. Congress where the U.S. House representation is based on population, but the U.S. Senate is based on two senators per state.

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The Phillips County Plan would call for equal representation per county in one house of the legislature. For example, the Colorado House could be represented on the basis of one per county, which would make for 64 members. There are currently 65 based on a population representation.

Phillips County commissioners were motivated by the representation issue to put the 51st state question on the ballot, said Schafer when addressing the Re-1J Board of Education and Holyoke City Council on Tuesday, Oct. 1 and the Holyoke Chamber of Commerce on Tuesday, Sept. 24.

The commissioners have also scheduled to discuss the issue at meetings of the Holyoke and Haxtun fire departments, Town of Haxtun, Haxtun school board and chamber, Paoli town board and Holyoke and Haxtun Lions clubs.

Commissioner Harlan Stern noted that info meetings in August in both Haxtun and Holyoke overwhelmingly told them to put the issue on the ballot as a way to have rural Colorado's voice heard.

Schafer further explained that this vote on Referendum 1A is an advisory one. Commissioners would view a favorable vote as a loud message to the state and advice to the county that change needs to be sought.

The first priority now—and if the ballot issue passes—is to change the way the rural area of the state is represented.

Commissioners feel if the 51st state ballot issue fails in Phillips County, it weakens the plan to change the way the county is represented at the state level.

To summarize, the commissioners emphasize that their priority is not to secede from the state of Colorado but to send a message that the rural voice of the state is not being heard. They

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interpret that passing Referendum 1A would support the need for change—not the move to secede from the state of Colorado.

“The 51st state movement offers Coloradans a platform and a voice—it says we need a change,” said Schafer at the conclusion of the Holyoke school board presentation last week.

Ten counties in the northeast quadrant of Colorado, as well as Moffat County in northwest Colorado, have put the 51st state question on their ballots.

CCI prioritizes representation for 2014

Phillips County commissioners attended a Colorado Counties Inc. meeting Friday, Oct. 4 at which time legislative priorities were set for 2014.

It was a long and arduous day, reported Schafer, but he was excited to report that CCI members voted 29.5-24.5 to support legislation in 2014 regarding a change in representation.

He called this one small step toward the representation effort.

Regardless of the Phillips County vote on Referendum 1A, Schafer said the commissioners will pursue different representation at the state level.

If the legislature doesn't move forward with a representation change, Schafer said there will be a move for a citizen's initiative to get it on the ballot in the future.

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