

51st state initiative moves forward

Written by Tony Rayl, The Yuma Pioneer

The 51st state movement, which already has expanded to 10 counties, is being opened to all interested counties in Colorado and neighboring states.

Washington County hosted a meeting Monday, June 24 at the fairgrounds in Akron and will host another one on July 8 as the new-state movement moves forward.

That includes interested counties going ahead with getting a ballot question certified for November's general election. That would have to be done by August.

Monday's meeting was mostly run by the Weld County commissioners, who began the whole 51st state movement. It was attended by commissioners from those two counties, as well as Yuma, Logan, Morgan, Phillips, Kit Carson, Sedgwick, Lincoln and Cheyenne, along with about 50 interested citizens and media.

Local Phillips County commissioners to attend July 8 meeting

By Darci Tomky

Phillips County commissioners were present at the Monday, June 24 meeting hosted by Washington County in Akron for counties interested in hearing more about breaking off from Colorado to form the 51st state.

Phillips County was one of 10 counties represented at last week's meeting, but they are continually hearing of more counties that may be interested, both in Colorado and in bordering states—something that will be explored at the next meeting Monday, July 8 at 2 p.m.

51st state initiative moves forward

Written by Tony Rayl, The Yuma Pioneer

Commissioners will again be attending this upcoming meeting at the Washington County event center in Akron, and any interested citizens can also attend.

“I’m for looking into it,” said Commissioner Joe Kinnie of the idea to form a new state. “I’m for it,” he added.

“It has to be driven by the people ... a desire of the people,” said Commissioner Harlan Stern, pointing out a consensus of the commissioner board that this must be a decision made by the residents of Phillips County and the other interested counties.

The suggested process is to put the issue on the November ballot this year, explained commissioners. That means official action would need to take place by the Phillips County commissioners in July to meet the August deadline.

Weld County’s commissioners—chairmen Bill Garcia and Mike Freeman, Douglas Rademacher, Barbara Kirkmeyer and Sean Conway—spoke about the disconnect felt between rural Colorado and the urban corridor. A list of legislation passed over the past year or more has led to this point, with the renewable energy mandate for rural electric cooperatives, Senate Bill 252, continually referred to as the final straw, along with the gun control legislation passed this past legislative session.

“I think that bill (252) demonstrates the hypocrisy going on in the state legislature,” Conway said. “...There is no dialogue. We feel disenfranchised, and it’s not getting any better.”

51st state initiative moves forward

Written by Tony Rayl, The Yuma Pioneer

Also, legislation concerning oil and gas barely was defeated, and Democrats have promised to bring more oil and gas legislation to the table for the 2014 session.

The state's breakdown of transportation regions has been changed, and now rural leaders are being told "low-volume" roads are being pushed even further down the list. Snow removal on rural highways was cut back a few years ago as a cost-saving measure.

Weld County commissioners also touched on unfunded mandates for education and dissatisfaction with the state funding mechanism.

Kirkmeyer said not only was Weld County and rural Colorado not part of the discussion for SB 252 ("It took them all of a week to slam that through," she said.) but also was left out of the discussion about the oil and gas setbacks. She noted that Weld County has the majority of oil and gas production in the state, but was not even asked to the stakeholders meetings.

Morgan County Commissioner Laura Teague noted, however, that at least the core of Weld County is an urban center along the Front Range and expressed concern about if the Weld County leadership were to change in the future to a more liberal leaning.

Kirkmeyer said Weld County identifies more with the rural counties than it does with Denver, Boulder and Fort Collins areas.

Concerns also were raised about Weld County dominating a new state as it definitely would be the population center. It was stated the state constitution could be set up to avoid that from happening.

51st state initiative moves forward

Written by Tony Rayl, The Yuma Pioneer

Commissioners voice comments

Much of the meeting was spent allowing the various county commissioners voice their own opinions and share what kind of feedback they have heard.

Yuma County Commissioner Trent Bushner said he has not received a negative comment yet. He said he does not think a new state would ever happen, but he likes the idea of the effort at least sending a loud and clear message that rural Colorado has had enough of being ignored.

Commissioner Robin Wiley said he also has not heard a negative comment from constituents. Both he and Bushner expressed a desire to have the effort be a citizens-driven initiative.

Yuma County Commissioner Dean Wingfield, noting he was probably the only Democrat in the room, said he has not heard one positive comment yet. He called the idea of a new state “ridiculous.”

Wingfield said he too is not happy with a lot of things going on at the state level, however, “We elect people to represent us. I think that’s where we need to go.” He noted both parties are reaching to the fringe of their membership. “Until both get back to common sense, we’re going to have problems.”

Logan County Commissioner Rocky Samber said he hears cautious optimism and is in favor of at least trying to figure something out. Logan County reported hearing some negative and some positive comments.

Most commissioners reported they had heard nothing but support for the movement and were ready to move forward. Some said they were there just to learn more and had not received much feedback from constituents.

Washington County Commissioner David Foy said something needs to be done to let people

51st state initiative moves forward

Written by Tony Rayl, The Yuma Pioneer

know rural citizens and leaders are dissatisfied. He noted rural commissioners always are going somewhere for a meeting but that the effort needs to be done to protect rural interests. He touched on efforts to take away local control of child welfare as another example.

“It’s vitally important our voices are heard,” Foy said.

Boundaries expand

Interest in forming a new state reportedly is coming in from all over.

Weld County commissioners reported hearing from Western Slope counties and even from Otero County in northeast New Mexico. They said they have heard from some Front Range counties, such as El Paso.

Washington County Commissioner Terry Hart said a constituent suggested looking at joining Wyoming, rather than form a new state.

Gene Bauerle of Sedgwick County suggested looking at the panhandle of Nebraska and possibly Wyoming and parts of Kansas to join the new-state effort.

“We could make a viable state here if we do it right,” Bauerle said.

Conway asked at the end of the meeting if the counties there were interested in allowing others to join the effort. The general consensus was to expand to whomever is interested, including out-of-state entities.

51st state initiative moves forward

Written by Tony Rayl, The Yuma Pioneer

Ballot question, details explained

Weld County has hired the University of Northern Colorado to do an economic development study.

Weld County's Garcia noted that an immediate criticism of the plan is that there is not enough people and tax base. He said a quick look at the numbers show that the 10 counties represented at Monday's meeting have just under 10-percent of the assessed value in Colorado but only about 7 percent of the population.

Kirkmeyer said that when one adds back in the oil and gas severance tax revenue, the 10 counties give more to the state coffers than they receive in state assistance.

Conway said preliminary numbers look good.

The Weld County commissioners bragged how their county is run on a balanced budget—it has no debt, has a strong reserve and almost is to the point it needs to provide a rebate to its taxpayers. The same business model would be utilized in the operation of a new state.

“At the end of the day, it's a tremendous opportunity to take our business practices and apply it to a state,” Conway said.

Weld County attorney Bruce Barker explained there are three basic requirements: The Colorado legislature needs to approve it, the U.S. Congress needs to approve it, and a new state cannot be an island unto itself surrounded by the old state, it needs to have counties on the state's

51st state initiative moves forward

Written by Tony Rayl, The Yuma Pioneer

border to participate.

It would require Colorado's voters approving amending the state constitution to change Colorado's boundaries.

Voters in the individual counties also would need to authorize their commissioners to include their county in a new state. This would need to be done first before certifying a constitutional amendment for the state's voters.

If the counties' votes were to be favorable, then it would be up to the state legislature to refer amending the state constitution to change the boundaries to the statewide ballot. If the legislature does not refer it, then it would have to be done through the petition process.

If it got through all of that, then it would go to the U.S. Congress.

There was debate on whether the county level should be citizen initiated. As mentioned above, Bushner and Wiley have said they would rather see it done that way than spend county resources. Bushner noted ballot questions are not free, and more money could be spent if the ballot question is challenged.

Barker recommended not bothering with a citizens initiative but rather just put it on the ballot and let the people vote; that would allow the commissioners to know whether or not their constituents want to move forward with a new state.

"You won't really know what people think until they vote," Conway said.

Barker also supplied two versions of a ballot question. Commissioners would have to get a ballot question approved by their county clerks sometime in August in order to get on November ballot.

51st state initiative moves forward

Written by Tony Rayl, The Yuma Pioneer

All interested parties will meet again July 8 at 2 p.m. at the Events Center on the Washington County Fairgrounds in Akron.

The Holyoke Enterprise July 4, 2013