

AP



Foes of massive Arizona tax cuts file to block them

By BOB CHRISTIE

PHOENIX (AP) — A group of public education advocates on Tuesday filed enough signatures to at least temporarily block a massive tax cut championed by Republicans in the Arizona Legislature and a second tax cut aimed at exempting small-business owners from a new tax on the wealthy.

But the Invest in Arizona Now coalition fell short of filing on a third tax cut bill that caps income taxes at the current 4.5% rate. That measure shields high-earning Arizona taxpayers from a 3.5% surcharge approved by voters last year when they passed Proposition 208.

Tuesday's filing prevents two of the three tax cut bills enacted by the Legislature and signed by GOP Gov. Doug Ducey in late June from taking effect as scheduled on Wednesday. They would cut taxes by nearly \$2 billion a year by phasing in a flat 2.5% income tax rate that mainly benefits the wealthy.

Education advocates turned in more than 215,000 signatures to block the big tax cut, far more than the 118,823 needed to put the law on hold until November 2022 when voters can weigh in. The small business exemption is on much shakier footing, with referendum backers only filing about 123,500 signatures.

“That one is going to be challenging to not be knocked off” during the signature verification process, said Joe Thomas, president of the Arizona Education Association.

The coalition of education advocates argue that the new tax cuts will prevent the Legislature from boosting funding for schools and other important spending priorities. Arizona is near the bottom for school funding among the 50 states and teachers remain among the lowest-paid in the country despite a 20% raise they won after a 2018 statewide strike.

“Imagine schools where teachers can dedicate themselves to classrooms and students instead of splitting their time between teaching and working extra jobs,” kindergarten teacher Kelley Fisher said at a Tuesday news conference announcing the referendum filing. “Imagine schools where parents could be true partners in their child’s learning, instead of acting as the emergency person.”

The referendums still must pass a signature check to proceed, and the Arizona Free Enterprise Club, a pro tax cut lobbying group, has sued to block the Secretary of State’s office from certifying the measure for the ballot. They argue that the constitution does not allow referrals for measures that provide for “support and maintenance” of state government and that tax cut bills fall into that category.

“The tax increase proponents shouldn’t pop the champagne quite yet,” Danny Seiden, president and CEO of the Arizona Chamber of Commerce & Industry President, said in a statement. He noted if the referrals survive the court challenge they still must win a campaign against a well-funded opposition.

“In the meantime, we’ll maintain our position that the reforms adopted by the Legislature and signed by Gov. Ducey earlier this year make Arizona more competitive than ever,” Seiden said.

Arizona education backers have risen up in the past five years against what they say is the GOP’s failure to support K-12 public schools.

In the past four years, they successfully referred a universal voucher expansion to the ballot and voters soundly rejected the expansion. The 2018 statewide teacher strike won the 20% pay raise and advocates also collected enough signatures to get Proposition 208 on the ballot, which added the 3.% income tax surcharge to the wealthy. An August state Supreme Court ruling put that new revenue in jeopardy.

Arizona’s constitution allows voters to block new legislation by collecting signatures from 5% of the people who voted in the past general election. If the petition sheets and signatures are verified by the Secretary of State and county recorders, the law is put on hold until voters decide at the next general election.

Also Tuesday, a group that was circulating petitions in hopes of blocking three new election laws they contend amount to voter suppression failed to collect enough signatures, organizers said Tuesday.

The group needed to file nearly 120,000 valid signatures to prevent the laws approved by the Republican-controlled Legislature earlier this year from taking effect. But they fell well short and will not file with the Arizona Secretary of State by Tuesday’s deadline, said Alison Porter, senior advisor for [Arizona Deserves Better](#).

“We weren’t there on any of them,” Porter said. “I do feel like we won in terms of creating more awareness of what our legislators are doing in the name of representing Arizonans at the Capitol.”

Arizona Deserves Better was trying to block a bill requiring that voters who do not vote in two election cycles be removed from the list of people who automatically get mailed ballots, and a second blocking election officials from taking private grants.

A third measure contains a host of what Republican backers call “election security measures” but that opponents say are designed to suppress the vote and compromise the privacy of the ballot.

A judge on Monday blocked that law from taking effect as part of a larger lawsuit targeting provisions in several budget bills, including a ban on school mask requirements.

Republican backers argued the new election laws were needed to provide election security measures.