

Gas-tax petition has enough names

By **BARBARA HOBEROCK**
World Capitol Bureau

OKLAHOMA CITY — A group whose members hope to increase the gasoline tax is one step closer to its goal.

Oklahomans for Safe Bridges and Roads has gathered more than 230,000 signatures on a petition that needs only 219,000 valid signatures to get the measure on the ballot, the group announced Thursday.

More signatures are expected, said Crystal Derwenski, a spokeswoman for Oklahomans for Safe Bridges and Roads.

The group wants to increase the fuel tax by 5 cents a gallon for gasoline and by 8 cents a gallon for diesel, bringing the total for each to 22 cents.

The money would be put in a lockbox and used to improve state roads and bridges.

The proposal would lock in the amount that the Oklahoma Department of Transportation now receives from fuel taxes so that lawmakers could not reduce appropriations in response to additional funds the agency would get from the tax increase.

When they announced the initiative petition drive in September, supporters said they believed that the increase would bring in about \$150 million a year.

The group expects to submit petition signatures to the Secretary of State's Office on Dec. 20. The deadline for submission is Dec. 24.

If the secretary of state certifies the signature count, the measure next must be approved by the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

"We don't anticipate a protest due to the sheer number," Derwenski said. "It is the largest amount of signatures gathered in the history of Oklahoma for one initiative petition."

If the petition is approved by the Supreme Court, Gov. Brad Henry would schedule an election.

"Philosophically, Governor Henry opposes any general tax increases, but he's not averse to giving voters the chance to decide whether they want to increase targeted taxes for a specific purpose, such as the tobacco tax recently approved

by Oklahomans to finance health care improvements," said Paul Sund, a Henry spokesman.

Sund said it is difficult to predict an election date.

Oklahoma Department of Transportation Director Gary Ridley said the number of signatures indicates that voters are interested in the issue.

"The public owns the system, and the conditions... are theirs to decide," he said.

Of the predicted \$150 million in revenue, about \$9 million would go to cities and about \$9 million would go to counties. The rest would go to the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, Ridley said.

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Architect proposes 'iconic' fountain as part of river plans

By **BRIAN BARBER**
World Staff Writer

River Parks Authority members were shown design plans Thursday for a fountain that would be in the middle of the Arkansas River and shoot water more than 100 feet in the air.

"I see this being something very iconic for Tulsa," said local architect Brian Freese, who is developing the project.

It has been selected by the Oklahoma Centennial Commission as one of the official projects that will commemorate the state's 100th birthday in 2007.

But Freese said he is working out the location and trying to secure money for the project.

He is trying to raise as much as \$750,000 in private funds to build the fountain and \$1 million more for an endowment that would pay for its ongoing operation and maintenance.

The fountain would have four spouts that would shoot water into the air at angles to form a pyramid.

"It could appear to be different things to different people," Freese said. "It might look like a tepee to some, while to others it might resemble an oil derrick."

Freese said he consulted many experts, including those involved with the famed fountain in front of the Bellagio Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas.

Authority members took no action on the fountain design because the project is still in its preliminary stages. They did say that the project would have to be fully funded for maintenance for them to accept it.

The members also said the debris and silt in the river could pose problems to the mechanics of the fountain.

Freese will take his design to the Indian Nations Council of Governments, which is pursuing a master plan for the Arkansas River Corridor.

In other business, the authority approved the Tulsa Rowing Club's plan to expand its boathouse at the River West Festival Park, 715 W. 21st St.

The club is in the process of raising about \$300,000 for extra bays, an exercise room, an outside porch and driveway space and to make improvements to the facility, built in 1991.

The club's membership has grown because of the popularity of the rowing program at the University of Tulsa and its juniors program for high school students. With the students and the adults in the masters program, about 120 rowers are club members, President Mike Kneafsey said.

"We want to be able to expand because these young people are really the future of rowing in Tulsa, and we're expecting more of them," he said.

The club, which was started in 1983, leases the land for its boathouse from the authority for only \$1 and is responsible for the utilities and maintenance. Its lease runs until 2013.

The lease will be changed to incorporate the additional area that the expansion will consume.

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Budget chief urges caution on revenue plans

By **MARIE PRICE**
World Capitol Bureau

OKLAHOMA CITY — The new House budget chairman said Thursday that state leaders should take a cautious approach to estimating income from the new lottery, gaming law and tobacco tax increase.

"We're looking at new revenue with no history of what those collections will be," said Rep. Chris Bengé, R-Tulsa.

A state finance official said that over the last two years Oklahoma has employed new revenue-forecasting methodology that produces more-conservative projections.

The Office of State Finance estimates that once the lottery is up and running, the state could realize \$100 million to \$150 million each year in reve-

nues.

But Oklahoma's lottery would have to perform as well as Texas' to produce \$150 million, Bengé said.

According to the North American Association of State and Provincial Lotteries, he said, Texas averages \$141.53 per person in lottery sales.

Bengé said lotteries in Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska and New Mexico — states more similar to Oklahoma — averaged lottery sales of slightly less than \$80 per person in 2002.

"We might expect to collect between \$70 million and \$90 million," he said.

State Finance Director Scott Meacham said Bengé's per-capita methodology for calculating potential lottery revenues is "somewhat flawed" because it

includes minors, who are not allowed to gamble.

A better procedure, he said, is to make per-household projections, which is how officials came up with possible lottery revenues.

Revenue projections for casino gambling also vary widely, Bengé said.

He said House fiscal staff members estimated that the new gaming law would produce \$34 million in additional revenue, about half of the Office of State Finance's estimate of \$71 million.

Meacham said the \$34 million staff estimate for gaming revenues was for a partial year.

Officials believe that the state could receive between \$70 million and \$100 million from new racetrack and tribal gaming law

following an expected "ramp-up" period, he added.

Regarding the net 55-cent increase in the tobacco tax, Bengé said revenues from that levy have declined steadily in recent years.

If the higher tax has its intended effect of reducing smoking, he said, state revenues will fall, as well.

It is true, Meacham said, that tobacco tax revenues have dropped about a penny per year over the last decade.

However, he said, officials have taken into account declining demand and lost tax revenue as a result of "gray market" purchases in making their tobacco-tax revenue forecast.

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AG, poultry reps discuss cleanup

WORLD CAPITOL BUREAU

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson and representatives from six poultry companies met Thursday in Tulsa to discuss a potential consent decree aimed at cleaning up eastern Oklahoma watersheds.

Edmondson and the companies said in a statement that the meeting was "productive."

"While we reached no formal resolution of the issues, we have made positive progress toward identifying areas on which to work," the joint statement said.

"We will continue Friday and schedule further meetings over the next several weeks."

The six poultry companies — Peterson Farms, Cargill, George's Inc., Tyson Foods, O.K. Foods and Simmons

Foods — agreed last month to clean up waste in the region that can't safely be applied to land.

At issue is phosphorus-rich chicken waste, which promotes algae blooms in rivers and lakes.

The blooms take oxygen from the water and choke aquatic life. They also can create taste and odor problems in drinking water.

Hiatt hopes to name panelists next week

WORLD CAPITOL BUREAU

OKLAHOMA CITY — House Speaker-elect Todd Hiatt said Thursday that he hopes to name members to House committees and budget subcommittees next week.

Hiatt already has announced a revamping of the committee system, combining certain previous panels and reducing the number of standing committees in the House.

Emerging from a Republican Caucus meeting Thursday after-

noon, Hiatt said members are in the beginning stages of formalizing their agenda for the 2005 legislative session, which begins Feb. 7.

"Being in the majority gives a new dimension to the creation of an agenda," he said. "We have a better opportunity to accomplish our goals."

In the November general election, Republicans took over the House majority for only the second time since statehood.

Hiatt said the 57 House Republicans are "working hard to

put our best foot forward" and come up with a platform representing the interests of the people of Oklahoma.

Although the agenda is still being crafted, Hiatt said it will focus on the creation of jobs, increased wages, more affordable health care and a better quality of life.

The GOP agenda also can be expected to call for additional workers compensation and lawsuit reform, although the caucus has not yet taken an official position on those issues.

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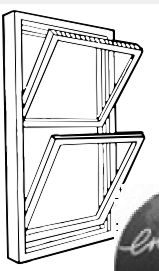
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