***All Things Nebraska - For Release Week of June 10, 2024***

**All Things Nebraska**

*By Paul Hammel, Retired Senior Reporter for Nebraska Examiner*

Have you been to the grocery store or courthouse lately and been approached in the parking lot by not one, but two people seeking signatures on initiative petitions concerning abortion rights?

Confused?

You’re not alone.

For what appears to be the first time in history, Nebraskans are being asked to sign not one, not two, but three petitions seeking to determine if and when a woman can have an abortion.

And according to Secretary of State Bob Evnen, if more than one petition makes the ballot, the one that got the most votes will become law.

It’s not the only funny business going on with the right of the citizenry to pass or repeal laws via petition.

Earlier this year, the Legislature passed a new school choice law that served to replace and repeal the 2023 “Opportunity Scholarship Act,” which supporters of public education had worked feverishly to qualify a referendum on the issue on the November ballot (and spent $1.8 million in the process).

But since the 2023 law doesn’t exist, the referendum was pulled from the ballot. Opponents of using public funds to finance private schools called the episode a dirty trick, and “underhanded.” It was a novel way to nullify a public vote on the issue, though another costly referendum drive, to put the newest law on the ballot, is underway.

But let’s get back to another firecracker-hot social issue: abortion.

Current Nebraska law bans abortion after 12 weeks.

But pro-choice forces, led by Planned Parenthood and Nebraska Appleseed, felt that law was too restrictive, so they launched a petition in November to legalize abortion up until the time of fetal viability, which is when a medical provider determines a fetus can live outside the womb, usually around 22-24 weeks.

That petition, dubbed “Protect Our Rights,” has gathered nearly $1.3 million in donations, mostly from Appleseed and Planned Parenthood.

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But pro-life forces, led by Nebraska Right to Life and Nebraska Family Alliance, believe that goes too far, so they launched a petition drive in March to place on the ballot a measure to ban abortion after the first trimester of pregnancy, around 13 weeks, about where current law sits.

Entitled “Protect Women and Children,” that initiative has attracted about $1.5 million in donations, primarily from two frequent and well-heeled givers to conservative causes, former governor and now U.S. Sen. Pete Ricketts and Tom and Shawn Peed of Lincoln. Each gave $500,000.

There’s a third group called “Choose Life Now,” which seeks to ban abortion almost completely by granting “personhood” to embryos and fetuses in a mother’s womb, thus making it illegal to end a pregnancy unless a woman’s life is in jeopardy.

But observers, according to Aaron Sanderford of the Nebraska Examiner news site, don’t give that third effort much of a chance to qualify for the ballot given that it was launched late — the deadline to submit nearly 125,000 valid signatures of registered voters is less than a month away, on July 3. Time is growing short.

As we all know, abortion rights has become a huge issue in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in June of 2022 to strike down Roe v. Wade, which had been the law of the land for nearly 50 years.

 The ruling meant each state would decide when and if abortion is allowed. Nebraska lawmakers tried, and fell short, of passing a so-called “fetal heartbeat” bill to ban abortion once an unborn baby’s heartbeat is first detected, usually around six weeks (which abortion rights advocates point out is before many women know they’re pregnant).

But it appears likely that Nebraskans now will be asked to vote on at least two ballot measures concerning abortion, one to basically retain existing law and another to expand abortion rights.

Polls have consistently shown that most Nebraskans oppose a total ban on abortion in the state.

But where do they land on something less than that? A 12-week ban? Or allowing abortion up to fetal viability?

Abortion rights have been on a definite winning streak since the striking down of Roe v. Wade. Several states, including our mostly conservative neighbors to the south, Kansas, have rejected restrictions on the procedure.

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A recent Flatwater Free Press article suggested that Nebraska’s current abortion law was a factor in a decline in medical students in the state seeking to become OB/GYNs, though others pointed out that declines have been the norm nationwide.

But what is clear is that Nebraskans will likely get to decide the abortion issue at the ballot box this fall.

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