

Executive Vice President's Letter



Tom McCabe

Initiative 164 Endures Vicious Attacks

When you take on the Establishment here in Washington State, the powers-that-be make sure your fight is a vicious, bloody, knock-down battle.

That's what BIAW found in its successful campaign to bring a property rights initiative to the Legislature for a vote. Through I-164, we mean to wrest control over land away

from the bureaucrats and environmentalists and give it back to the people who bought the property and pay taxes on it. Of all the weapons the state used against us, including an outright smear campaign, the most frightening was its own bureaucratic ineptitude.

BIAW got its first taste of this when we turned in more than 231,000 signatures in support of I-164. Secretary of State Ralph Munro had his workers load our petitions into the back of an open-bed pickup truck with no official logo on it and drive away, with our I-164 petitions flapping in the breeze. That was after 5 p.m. on December 30. Government offices were closed and not scheduled to reopen until January 3. Where did the pickup go? Were the petitions secure? Unfortunately, things got worse. For the next month, while the state tried to fulfill its obligation to make sure I-164 had enough valid signatures (181,667), we were treated to:

- Numerous math errors and incompetence.
- Lost and missing petitions.
- An arbitrary, outdated certification process.
- And finally, an unprecedented series of political attacks against us by the supposedly neutral state office we had to depend on to fairly count our signatures.

Math errors: Days before certification, we were told I-164 had 162,000 good signatures out of 190,000 counted. We celebrated, believing that I-164 was clearly on track to get certified. But the next day when we asked for a count, we were told there were 159,000 signatures out of 198,000. So what happened? We were given a confusing bureaucratic answer that we still don't understand.

With a sigh, we asked the state's accountant what percentage 159,000 was of 192,000. She looked at us and asked, "How do you do percentages again?"

Lost signatures: Worse still, at one point during the count, the Secretary of State's office misplaced 15,000 signatures. They didn't seem to know it until we pointed out that we'd turned in 231,000, not the 216,000 they said they had. State workers found them later stacked in a corner.

Arbitrary certification process: The state's own record keeping process made it impossible to track who collected signatures. Our signature gatherers marked the tops of petitions to indicate who collected them. But before counting, the state ripped off the tops of the petitions, including our identifying marks.

Also, Secretary of State Ralph Munro hired 130 temporary workers to compare each signature on the petitions to the signatures on voter registration cards. BIAW's Political Affairs Coordinator Elliot Swaney signed his card 15 years ago when he registered to vote at age 18. His signature today doesn't look similar to his signature in 1980. (Does yours?) His signature was declared invalid. (Was yours?)

Political attacks: Despite the rigorous scrutiny, I-164 still had 184,340 valid voter signatures, for a 79.5 percent validation rate. To compare, when the state checked all signatures of I-97 in 1988, the validation rate was 74 percent. (I-97 was a toxic waste measure sponsored by environmentalists.) Yet the state indicated that I-164's validation rate was unusually and suspiciously low.

Secretary of State Ralph Munro despises paid signature gathering. He also dislikes initiatives and property rights. In January, he called a hastily-arranged press conference to announce to God and country that he had discovered some fraudulent signatures on I-164. Munro apparently wanted to pin the crime on a paid signature gathering firm. (Yes, fraudulent signatures on an initiative petition is a crime punishable by five years in jail.) He said: "I'm not going to sit back and let some California signature gatherer (who helped on I-164) get away with giving the finger to the people of Washington." Munro believes that if he can tie fraud to paid gatherers, he can overturn a federal judges' ruling that allows payment per signature.

There's no way of knowing where the fraudulent signatures came from. But don't count out sabotage, which may have occurred within Ralph Munro's office. Even after the petitions made it from the pickup to the gym where they were counted, security was still nonexistent. And with 130 temporary workers inspecting petitions, who knows if fraudulent signatures were planted.

Meanwhile, Gov. Lowry and the environmentalists portray I-164 as "evil incarnate." They tied initiative supporters to the Moonies, Japanese war criminals and even the Adolph Coors family. (Sorry Governor, it's just plain old folks who are exasperated with the tyranny of bureaucracy.)

HEALTH CARE REPRISAL: The House voted Feb. 13 to repeal much of Lowry's 1993 Health Care Act. Regular readers of this column may recall that 56 House members voted for the act in 1993. Of those, only 25 are left—Many were defeated in the last election.

Rep. Betty Sue Morris (D-Vancouver), one of my favorite legislators because of her honesty and decency, voted for the Lowry Act in 1993. But this year, she voted for the repeal. She explains: "I think I won the last election because my voters trusted me to listen to them and admit it if we did something wrong." It would be nice if more legislators would admit it when they vote wrong. (Four other legislators changed their minds on health care: Reps. Basich (D-Grays Harbor), Chappell (D-Centralia), G. Fisher (D-NormandyPark) and Quall (D-Mount Vernon). Congratulations to all of them!) ■