

Universal health in running to be on Mass. ballot

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BOSTON — Sponsors of potential ballot questions covering eight public policy topics and running the gamut from health care to education to tolls were cleared last week by Attorney General Thomas Reilly to take the next step in the petition process - collecting thousands of voter signatures.

The only proposal not certified by Reilly called for legalization of casino gambling in Massachusetts. That proposal was filed without the signatures of 10 registered voters, failing to meet one of the most basic requirements.

Topics addressed by the questions still in the mix for the ballot in 2004 or 2006 include abolishing the motor vehicle excise tax, ending tolls on western portions of the Massachusetts Turnpike, and calling for health care coverage for everyone in the state.

To have their proposals considered by the state Legislature, supporters of initiative petitions, which propose new state laws, must collect 65,825 registered voter signatures by Dec. 3, 2003. If the Legislature does not act on the petitions by May 2004, supporters must gather another 10,971 signatures by July to earn a spot on the 2004 ballot.

Two of the proposals -- the one calling for universal health care and another calling on residents to join a global union of democratic nations - would amend the state Constitution, an endeavor that is even more arduous.

Arduous Process

In addition to meeting the same signature requirements as initiative petitions, Constitutional amendment backers must also get their proposals approved by 25 percent of lawmakers meeting at two successive Constitutional Conventions, or joint meetings of the House and Senate. As a result, the earliest such proposals could reach the ballot would be 2006.

Dr. John Goodson, a sponsor of the universal health care proposal, said unnamed groups challenged their proposal during the certification process, alleging that it was duplicative of language in a 2000 ballot question and questioning the legality of taking on health care access as a constitutional responsibility.

In urging Reilly not to certify the health care question, the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, Retailers Association of Massachusetts and Associated Industries of Massachusetts said the question is unconstitutional, too broad to implement, would require court intervention, and would be "prohibitively expensive." They said the petition requires a plan for coverage for all residents and all "medically necessary" health care.

"There is no conceivable public or private insurance program that can meet all of these requirements simultaneously," Douglas Wilkins wrote in the brief. "If this measure is certified and adopted, the courts will decide who gets health coverage, what it will cover, and how much it will cost, leaving little or no choice for consumers and voters. Article 48 operates to preclude that result." □