

denver and the west

## Plan targets petitions-for-hire

**Bill would license firms, ban paying by number of signatures**

By John Ingold  
*The Denver Post*

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Secretary of State Bernie Buescher speaks to reporters Tuesday about legislation regulating companies hired by groups to gather signatures to put initiatives on the ballot. (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post )

A House panel gave unanimous support Tuesday to a bill that would clamp down on signature-gathering campaigns and their for-hire petition

circulators in the hopes of curbing ballot initiative hanky-panky. The bill is sponsored by House Speaker Terrance Carroll and has the backing of other legislative leaders, as well as Colorado's secretary of state.

"The idea behind the bill is so that when something gets on the ballot, we know it got there ethically and by a lawful process," said Carroll, D-Denver.

House bill 1326 comes in response to a November 2008 ballot packed with citizen initiatives, several dogged by accusations of unethical and even illegal behavior in the collection of signatures to put them before voters. Groups pushing the initiatives used companies that pay petition circulators to collect signatures, and Secretary of State Bernie Buescher said the perception is that anyone with enough money can tinker with Colorado's constitution.

"We should not just accept that Colorado law is for sale," he said.

The bill would require signature-gathering firms to be licensed by the state and would prohibit them from paying petition circulators by the signature. It would also impose several new accountability measures — such as tougher rules for petition notarization — and would create a system by which a circulator's signatures could be tossed if certain requirements are not met.

The bill also would make other changes to the initiative process, moving up deadlines for filing

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petitions and withdrawing initiatives, allowing people to remove their signature from a petition if they change their mind and tweaking the language surrounding initiatives. Changes to the constitution would continue to be known as amendments, but changes to state statutes would be known as propositions.

The House State, Veterans and Military Affairs Committee passed the bill unanimously Monday, though some members expressed concerns about whether a requirement that initiative backers pay for petition-circulator training amounted to a poll tax.

"No one wants to limit access to the ballot," House Minority Leader Mike May, a Parker Republican and bill co-sponsor, said later. "It tries to strike a balance between cleaning up some of the law and still maintaining access to the ballot."

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