

From the Durango Herald March 7, 2008:

## Roberts backs reform effort

Amending state constitution would take more work

March 7, 2008

By Joe Hanel | *Herald Denver Bureau*

DENVER - It would get harder to amend the Colorado Constitution under a plan lawmakers announced Thursday.

### **Here are the five steps in a plan proposed Thursday by the Colorado Legislature's Select Committee on Constitutional Reform to modify the way the state does citizen-initiated changes to laws and the Colorado Constitution:**

- Current law requires petition signatures equal to 5 percent of the votes cast in the last secretary of state's race to make the ballot.

Proposed change: Use the governor's race instead.

- Currently, the 5 percent requirement is the same for statutory laws and constitutional amendments.

Proposed change: 4 percent for statutory changes and 6 percent for constitutional amendments.

- Currently, signatures can be gathered anywhere in Colorado.

Proposed change: For constitutional amendments only, at least 10 percent of the signatures must come from each of Colorado's seven congressional districts.

- Currently, the Legislature can modify or repeal any statutory law passed by citizens.

Proposed change: Require a two-thirds majority of the Legislature to change any citizen-passed law for six years after the election.

- Extend the process for reviewing proposed constitutional amendments to give more people the chance to comment on a measure before it goes on the ballot.

Rep. Ellen Roberts, R-Durango, was one of six legislators who spent the last month crafting the plan. It would make it easier for voters to propose and pass an ordinary law, but harder to get a constitutional change on the ballot.

The topic is politically sensitive in Colorado, where groups from the left and the right have amended the constitution 21 times in the last 20 years.

"It's somewhat like a bite of \$3 steak. The more we chewed it, the bigger it got in our mouth, and we're about ready to spit something out," said Rep. Al White, R-Hayden, who served with Roberts on the panel.

The six lawmakers settled on a five-part plan that pushes citizen groups to support changes to ordinary "statutory" laws, rather than constitutional amendments.

For years, legislators have lamented how easy it is to amend the Colorado Constitution. Voters have passed amendments on everything from education funding and tax limitation to the spring bear hunt.

A troublesome amendment can be changed only with another constitutional amendment.

Senate President Peter Groff, D-Denver, announced plans to create the bipartisan Select Committee on Constitutional Reform in early January. Speaker of the House Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, also backed the effort.

The group did not attempt to rewrite or repeal anything that's already in the Constitution.

"It's been my mission to make something palatable, something that gets passed," said Sen. Abel Tapia, D-Pueblo, the committee's chairman.

The panel will present a bill to the Legislature, which will need to approve it by a two-thirds vote before it can go on the November ballot. Voters will have the final say.

Many citizen groups lost their trust in the Legislature after it repealed a campaign-finance statute that voters approved in 1996. Since then, most citizen campaigns have opted for constitutional amendments because it's equally difficult to pass either a statutory or constitutional change.

The panel wants to reverse the trend by making it easier to pass a statutory law and protecting citizen-initiated statutes from changes by the Legislature. On the other hand, the requirements to get a constitutional amendment on the ballot would get tougher.

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Tapia said the plan is being drafted now, but he did not know when it would be introduced.

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