

Deseret Morning News, Tuesday, April 17, 2007

## Some fans of Real stadium inked petition

**By Amelia Nielson-Stowell and Doug Smeath**

Deseret Morning News

Not everyone who signed the Real soccer petition was actually against the stadium: At least two of the petition signers are lawmakers who supported the deal in the House.

Rep. Phil Riesen, D-Salt Lake, and House Minority Leader Ralph Becker, D-Salt Lake, both voted in favor of the bill that sealed the state deal. But they also signed the petition offering voters the chance to overturn it.

"First and foremost, I'm a great believer in the referendum and initiative process," said Becker, a candidate for Salt Lake City mayor, speaking at a recent meet-the-candidates forum. "The people have a check on decisions that are made."

He said he believes the team will have "great value" for the Salt Lake area, and he voted for the deal because it included a number of conditions Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon wanted to place on it, such as Real's agreement to help fund a youth soccer academy.

Still, "I was thoroughly frustrated with the way that process was handled by the Legislature," he said.

Riesen did not return a phone call Monday seeking comment.

Thousands of signatures were turned in last week to county clerks across the state for a voter referendum against the public dollars given to the team. Among the handful of local politicians who signed, many supported the public funding plan that gave Real Salt Lake \$35 million in hotel-tax dollars for the team. Others have been against the deal from the get-go.

The Legislature approved the funding package in February, but if 92,000 signatures are certified, the matter could be voted on in state-wide balloting in either the February 2008 presidential primary or the November 2008 general election.

Through a request under the state's Government Records Access and Management Act, the Deseret Morning News read 341 packets of petition

signatures of Salt Lake County residents. A final number of the certified signers will not be available until the state checks them, which should be completed on April 30.

Many Utahns were surprised to watch the Legislature step up to Real's aid days after Corroon shot down the funds for a third time in nearly a year. Corroon deemed it a risky investment, but state leaders supported the bill, forcing Salt Lake County's cut of hotel-tax dollars to be used for land and infrastructure at the site.

Corroon and numerous county employees and elected officials signed the petition, including council members Jenny Wilson, Marv Hendrickson and Mark Crockett.

"I didn't sign it because I'm against soccer or the soccer stadium," Corroon said. "I signed it primarily because I believe in matters like this, the citizens should have the ability to be heard and have a vote."

Wilson, who is also a Salt Lake City mayoral candidate, could not be reached for comment Monday.

During the debate over the plan at the county level, Wilson advocated for the team continuing to play at the University of Utah's Rice-Eccles Stadium until soccer could be proved popular enough to have a viable stadium of its own. She voted against county funding for the stadium in July 2006.

Another Salt Lake City mayoral candidate, City Councilwoman Nancy Saxton, said she signed the petition because she thinks the state deal stinks.

"If the state was going to mandate that we use county funds, then they should have done the kind of financial scrutiny that the county did," she said.

She pointed to Goldman Sachs' decision to pull out of the investment in the stadium as a sign that the funding plan is not as sound as supporters would claim. Real has since secured iStar Financial as a new investor.

"It's important for cities, counties and states to be transparent when they make decisions, and this was not," she said. "If the state felt so strongly about it, they should have funded it themselves."

Rep. Jackie Biskupski, D-Salt Lake City, who voted against the measure in the House, said she hopes the referendum goes to a public vote because county residents elected Corroon to decide what to do with county funds. She signed the petition and even went door-to-door in her neighborhood with a packet one night.

"I think it's an issue that the folks in this county should get a chance to vote on. I mean, we're pulling dollars for a number of years out of the county budget for this land purchase and taking it out of other programs," she said.

Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, on the other hand, said he signed the petition because he doesn't think the public should help pay for a stadium.

"I don't think it's an appropriate use of public money to give tax dollars for the construction of a professional soccer stadium," said Stephenson, who voted against the deal in the Senate and who also heads the Utah Taxpayers Association. "It just comes down to the principle of the use of tax dollars for private purposes."

Real began construction on April 9 for a \$110 million soccer stadium in Sandy. Sandy has committed an additional \$10 million in redevelopment agency funds. Real hopes to finish the stadium in August 2008.

---

*Contributing: Leigh Dethman*

*E-mail: [astowell@desnews.com](mailto:astowell@desnews.com); [dsmeath@desnews.com](mailto:dsmeath@desnews.com)*

---

© 2007 Deseret News Publishing Company