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Initiative seeks to restrict government land seizures

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PHOENIX — A former state treasurer and an official from the Reagan administration launched a petition drive Thursday to try to limit the rights of cities and counties to take private property.

The initiative, which has funding from a national property-rights group, would block government agencies from using their power of "eminent domain" unless they can prove the land is needed for a true public purpose.

It also would specifically restrict communities from saying they need to condemn property because of slum or blight.

Instead, they would have to prove that taking each parcel was necessary "to eliminate a direct threat to public health or safety caused by the property in its current condition."

The measure also requires governments to pay landowners any time a new rule or regulation diminishes the value of their property. That would include both zoning changes and restrictions on how a property could be developed.

Backers need 122,612 signatures by July 6 to qualify for the November ballot.

Former state Treasurer Carol Springer acknowledged the limited time to get the signatures.

She said backing for the measure is being provided by Americans for Limited Government, an Illinois-based organization that has pushed similar measures in other states.

The group already has a lobbyist in Arizona in former Senate President Brenda Burns. She is pushing a similar measure through the Legislature.

But Springer, a Yavapai County supervisor who is leading the effort, said the initiative is necessary because the legislative proposal might get watered down, defeated or vetoed.

The plan also is backed by John Norton, a Phoenix resident who was deputy secretary of agriculture under Reagan.

Springer said the measure here and in other states is a response to a U.S. Supreme Court ruling last year upholding the right of a Connecticut city to take land and private homes on them to give them to a developer for a retail and office project.

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