



Houston drainage fee fight heading to Austin

by Gabe Gutierrez / 11 News

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HOUSTON – Opponents of Proposition 1 are planning to lobby the state legislature to strike down the controversial drainage fee, even after voters narrowly approved it earlier this month.

Don Hooper, who organized a political action committee blasting Prop 1, said the effort is underway. Last week, a group that included real estate executives, church leaders and car dealers met to discuss its options.

Proposition 1's opponents argue the ballot didn't mention a "fee" - just a "pay-as-you-go-fund" – and plan to ask lawmakers to consider restricting any drainage fee accordingly.

"The petition language is very different from the ballot language," Hooper said.

Supporters called the drainage fee a fiscally responsible way to fix Houston's crumbling infrastructure. The \$8 billion referendum would establish a fund to pay for drainage improvements over the next 20 years and prevent the city from borrowing money for those projects.

Renew Houston, the group of engineers backing the proposal, said it would cost the average homeowner just \$5 a month.

Churches, schools and other businesses want to be exempted from the drainage fee, which would drive up the cost for homeowners.

"Prop 1 is effectively duping the public in Houston into paying an incredibly large property tax," said Paul Bettencourt, a Prop 1 opponent and former Harris County tax assessor.

City council must decide on how to implement the fee by July 1. No matter who is exempted, the city must raise \$125 million per year.

Mayor Annise Parker said she hopes council will iron out most of the details by March and have a billing plan by May.

"We're not going to worry about what might or might not happen at the legislature," Parker said. "This is sour grapes by folks who tried to kill it when it was on the ballot. They failed to kill it on the ballot and we're just going to move on."

11 News Political Expert Bob Stein said the lobbying effort will be a long shot considering the other problems the state legislature will have on its plate like the budget shortfall and redistricting.

Stein also could not recall an instance where the legislature had struck down a ballot referendum that voters approved, but he said lawmakers had stepped in to alter certain city council ordinances before.

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