

Richmond: Kids' fund ballot initiative fails to get City Council OK, angering supporters

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RICHMOND -- For years, Kimberly Aceves has watched funding for teen recreational programs slashed as the city ricocheted from one budget crisis to another. But every time she asked officials to partner on creating a revenue stream, she says she's heard the same thing: It's just not the right time.

So Aceves, who runs the RYSE Center in Richmond, which serves some 1,200 young people each year, and her organization decided to take matters into their own hands by appealing directly to voters. In light of chronic underfunding of youth activities and many children living in broken homes or with parents who don't have resources to send them to camps and music lessons, would voters support devoting 3 percent of the city's budget on things like sports, gardening, arts and technology classes and job-training and violence-prevention programs?

The group collected 6,476 validated signatures, more than enough to qualify the Kids First initiative for the November ballot. But when it came time for the City Council to take action on the petition, it declined because the signatures hadn't been submitted by the 5 p.m. Friday deadline to be placed on the most recent council agenda; they were received the following Monday morning.

That has prompted outrage among those who say the measure was crushed because of political opposition from City Hall, which does not want anyone dictating how it spends its money.

"You're not supposed to use your opposition to an issue to block it from the voters," said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, who represents Richmond. "This was a political, not a legal, decision." A poll commissioned by the organizers earlier this year found 84 percent support for the initiative among voters.

On Tuesday, more than 50 young people, many of them African-American and Latino, spoke at City Hall to urge the city to qualify the measure for the ballot. They waved signs, and some even shed a few tears as they implored officials to act on the initiative.

"We need programs like this in our city, I need this for my little brother," said Veronica Stevens, 16. "I am tired of my friends dying around me."

Teen activists spent hundreds of hours, including after school and on weekends, walking the streets to collect signatures. Then came the news that they would have to wait, possibly until the 2018 election, after the council could not reach consensus to even discuss the issue.

"It's discouraging to see our elected officials do those things, but I am motivated to change the way they use their power," said Diana Ramirez, 17, a senior at Richmond High School. "Right now, they are not catering to the public that put them in their positions."

The council has criticized the initiative for lacking a funding stream, although the measure makes it clear the funding -- about \$4.3 million a year -- would come from the city budget. By comparison, the city spends \$75 million a year on police services. Opponents have also said it would steer millions toward local nonprofits, taking union jobs from city employees.

"There just aren't enough funds," said Councilman Eduardo Martinez, a retired teacher. "If this were to pass, we would have to gut even more city programs."

The council needs to act by Aug. 12, the deadline for any measure to qualify for the Nov. 8 ballot. But with the council on summer break until September, it means a special meeting is the only way to get the initiative on the ballot.

Some council members, including Jael Myrick and Martinez, have said they would be willing to hold such a meeting to get the initiative before voters. Mayor Tom Butt, a vociferous opponent, has refused to hold a special meeting, while other members did not respond to requests for comment.

"These kids did the work, so we should at least have considered it," Myrick said, adding that the Kids First supporters gathered 1,000 more signatures than supporters of a pro-rent control initiative that the council recently took action on despite disagreeing on the issue. "I don't think City Council realizes how negative of a message they are sending to our youth, and it unfortunately reinforces the cynicism many young people have about our political process."

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