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English - only movement targets Nashville, Tenn.

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AP

NASHVILLE, Tenn. NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) _ A city councilman is hoping voters will make Nashville the first major metropolitan area where English is the official language , although a majority of council members are publicly opposing the drive.

Councilman Eric Crafton worked for five months to pass his proposal to prohibit local government communications in languages other than English, but the measure was ultimately defeated when former Mayor Bill Purcell vetoed it, calling it unconstitutional, unnecessary and mean-spirited.

Now Crafton is trying to bring the measure back as a referendum on the November ballot.

"We worked so hard previously to pass a good bill," he said, "one that would require the use of English in boards, commissions and council meetings. When the mayor vetoed it, people kind of felt like their voices were thwarted."

In a twist, the city council, which previously passed a similar ordinance, voted 25-8 on Thursday in favor of a nonbinding resolution asking local voters not to sign Crafton's petition or support the measure if it makes it to the ballot. Mayor Karl Dean made a surprise appearance to speak against the proposal Crafton calls "English First."

Similar measures have passed in smaller communities, namely Taneytown, Md., the Dallas suburb of Farmers Branch and the Atlanta suburb of Cherokee County. But Nashville, with a population of almost 600,000 ? including a number of political refugees from Iraq,

Somalia and Sudan ? could be the first large city to pass a language bill like this.

Business groups, including the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, are worried it could hurt tourism and business development efforts.

"We were very disappointed this is being brought up again," said Chris Karbowski, spokeswoman for Nashville-based Bridgestone Americas Holding, the largest subsidiary of Japanese tire maker Bridgestone Corp.

"Nashville is such a cool city, such an inclusive city, such a welcoming city," she said. "This sends the wrong message about who we are."

To place the measure on the ballot, Crafton must collect just over 10,000 signatures from registered voters in the county by Saturday. In mid-June, shortly after the petition drive started, he expressed confidence that the signatures would be gathered quickly, announcing that nearly 4,000 signatures had been gathered in less than a week.

The petition drive slowed after that, but Crafton said Friday his Nashville English First group had reached its goal of about 12,000 signatures with a week to go before the deadline.

Nashville English First has mailed out about 40,000 postcards to voters and paid for some automated calls asking people to sign the petition, Crafton said. That's an unusually organized petition drive for the city.

He won't say who is funding the effort, and the donors won't become public unless the drive is successful.

It's unclear what impact the measure will have if passed by voters.

It requires all meetings of the council and its boards and commissions to take place in English, which they already do. Possibly the only time anyone has addressed Nashville's Metro Council in a foreign language without an interpreter came when Crafton decided to introduce his proposal in Japanese back in 2006.

And a provision that prohibits conflict with federal or state law, could make the entire thing moot, according to local civil rights attorney Jerry Gonzalez.

Most services provided by the city get at least some federal money and that funding generally requires translation and interpreter services be offered, at least to people speaking languages that are common in their areas.

"Swahili is not a language they would have to provide," Gonzalez said.

Theresa Harmon, co-founder of Tennesseans for Responsible Immigration Policies, is helping gather signatures for the petition drive. She sees the issue as a financial one.

"Metro Nashville spent a lot of money last year printing forms in every language imaginable," she said. "You won't believe the number of people who call us on a daily basis saying, 'I'm so tired of pressing 1 for English.' Taxpayers don't want this, but they're having to foot the bill for it."

But some opponents said passing the ordinance will cost taxpayers in court challenges.

Immigrant advocacy groups like the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition are prepared to fight the measure if it does get on the ballot, said coalition executive director Stephen Fotopulos.

"The idea that isolating people gives them an incentive to learn English misunderstands the process," he said. "It's critical that people feel welcome. That's how they learn, by interacting."

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