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Gay-rights opponents fail to get second referendum on ballot

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For the second time in a week, opponents of new gay-rights laws have failed to get a referendum on the November 2008 ballot.

As a result, on Jan. 1 Oregon will have a law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and a law allowing **domestic partnerships** for same-sex couples.

The secretary of state's office reported Friday that groups trying to keep a law -- prohibiting discrimination in housing, restaurants and other public services -- from taking effect had fallen about 1,300 signatures short. That followed Monday's news that the same groups had failed to qualify a referendum on **domestic partnerships**.

Both laws were passed after much debate in the 2007 Legislature.

Supporters hailed the news as a sign that Oregonians do not support discrimination against any group.

"This is a landmark day for Oregon because it shows who we are as a state and as a people," Gov. Ted Kulongoski said in a statement.

But opponents say they were able to achieve quite a lot in a few months: They collected tens of thousands of signatures without using paid circulators and without spending much money.

"If we'd had a few days more we would have made it," said David Crowe, director of Restore America, a small nonprofit founded in 1999 to urge Christians to vote.

The secretary of state's office said Friday that petitions submitted on the anti-discrimination law contained 53,875 valid signatures from a total of 59,761 submitted to county elections officials for verification. The groups needed 55,179 to qualify for the ballot.

Crowe, who created a political action committee called Concerned Oregonians to collect petitions for the two referendums, says he and others are talking about launching new signature-gathering drives to put initiatives on the November 2008 ballot, repealing both laws.

Opponents would have until July to collect nearly 83,000 signatures on each initiative.

"There's a head of steam mounting to do this again," Crowe said. "We don't think we're

going to have a problem at all."

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