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Signatures questioned in PG&E's quest for Yolo ballot initiative

Celia Lamb Staff writer

A campaign financed by Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to challenge the Sacramento Municipal Utility District's proposed annexation of Yolo County may have garnered some fraudulent signatures.

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But even with the suspected fraudulent signatures removed, a statistical sample indicates there would still be enough to qualify the initiative for a June vote.

PG&E has put at least \$600,000 into the campaign run by the Coalition for Reliable and Affordable Electricity. The ballot initiative would give Sacramento County residents an opportunity to cast an advisory vote on SMUD's proposal to add West Sacramento, Davis, Woodland and adjacent parts of Yolo County to SMUD's service area.

The campaign collected 53,317 signatures, well over the 31,395 signatures required to qualify the initiative for the ballot. The Sacramento County Voter Registration and Elections department examined 3 percent of the gathered signatures and found 32 percent might be invalid. Reasons included incomplete names and addresses, signatures and addresses that did not match voter registration records and names of people not registered to vote in Sacramento County.



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The county has required a verification check of each signature on the petition and has

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submitted the petition to the Secretary of State's Fraud Division, said Alice Jarboe, assistant registrar with the county.

"Fraud is unacceptable and should be investigated and reported to the Secretary of State," said coalition spokesman Jeff Raimundo. "We absolutely agree with that."

But because the campaign collected so many more signatures than needed, it would still have more than enough needed if the statistical sample results hold out for the entire group of signatures.

"This is going to qualify," Raimundo said.

He also said the campaign has offered to pay overtime for county workers to evaluate all of the signatures so the measure can qualify for the June primary election.

SMUD has pledged to sponsor a similar ballot initiative for the November election, but SMUD's initiative would bind the utility to the wishes of the voters. The Sacramento County Local Agency Formation Committee and Yolo County voters will also vote on SMUD's proposal. If approved, SMUD and PG&E would probably go to court to settle on a purchase price for PG&E's electrical distribution system in Yolo County.

Sacramento County qualifies about one local ballot initiative for a vote each year, Jarboe said. The last time a signature gatherer in Sacramento County was convicted of forging petition signatures was in 2003 during a campaign to abolish the Grant Joint Union High School District.

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