



# INDEPENDENT RECORD

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■ FIFTY CENTS

# Natelson backs effort to repeal utility measure

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HELENA — Republican Rob Natelson on Monday signed and endorsed Referendum 117, the petition drive led by two Democratic legislators aimed at repealing the major energy law passed by the 2001 Legislature.

Natelson is a University of Montana law professor and former candidate for governor who led two successful ballot-issue campaigns, although one was later ruled unconstitutional by the Montana Supreme Court. Natelson also is founding chairman of Montanans for Better Government and a board member of Montana Conservatives.

He also said he decided to back the petition drive to repeal HB474 because he believes it is a populist effort and considers himself to be a populist.

"I agree with those who say that the procedure by which such an important bill was passed appears to be

quite rushed and under the circumstances, the people should have the right to vote on it," Natelson said in a phone interview. "I trust the people to make the right decision."

Rep. Michelle Lee, D-Livingston, was pleased to get his support for I-117 in the final week of petitioning and believes it will boost its chances of qualifying for November 2002 ballot. She and Rep. Christopher Harris, D-Bozeman, are leading the drive.

(Natelson's and Democrats' support) shows a movement for consensus on both sides outside the usual political spectrum," Lee said.

The much-amended final version of HB474 passed on the 90th and final day of the 2001 Legislature. It occurred one day after PPL Montana agreed to sell electricity to Montana Power Co., provided the Legislature pass HB474, which provided MPC full recovery for its power purchase costs, and kill SB512,

## 19,718 signatures gathered so far

As of mid-afternoon Monday, backers of Referendum 117 say they have obtained 19,718 signatures of Montana voters and gotten enough signatures in the 34 state House districts required, but these are unofficial totals subject to check with state election officials.

To qualify for the 2002 ballot, they need 20,510 signatures, which is 5 percent of the people who voted in the 2000 governor's race.

They also need to obtain the signatures of 5 percent of voters in at least 34 of the 100 state House districts.

"We've got at least 34 districts," Lee said. "Now it's volume."

The group must turn in all the signatures to local election officials by 5 p.m. Friday.

an excise profits tax on energy providers that PPL opposed. The Republican-led Legislature did as requested.

Natelson said he's talked to Republican legislators he respects who regret having voted for HB474, adding: "One said, 'We'd shoot something down, and the leadership would come in with more junk.'"

His chief objection to HB474 is that it creates the Montana Power Authority,

which is designed to get the state of Montana into the power business.

"The bill is extraordinarily naive in its conception," Natelson said. "There's nothing in the history of the state of Montana to suggest that Montana's politicians and political appointees are going to be able to engage in the intricacies of the energy business, buying or selling or owning energy plants. This could be very expensive."