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STEM CELL BALLOT DRIVE 'A GO'

The former chief lobbyist for Michigan's trial attorneys was hired to head a bi-partisan petition drive to put on the 2008 ballot a measure to make legal embryonic stem cell research in Michigan, signaling that a stem cell ballot question this year is likely, the MIRS news service reported.

Mark Burton will head the Stem Cell Research Ballot Question Committee, a non-profit 501(c)4 that's currently drafting language for what is expected to be a constitutional amendment that would allow otherwise discarded human embryos to be used for research if the appropriate permissions are granted.

In other news, the RBQC hired the Rossman Group to be the public relations front for the committee, which is gearing toward a 2008 ballot question. According to Burton, the campaign effort will be funded and is drawing support from "hundreds" of interested parties on both sides of the political spectrum.

Asked about whether the fledging RBQC had wings, Rossman Group CEO Kelly Rossman-McKinney said, "It's very much for real. This is, as far as we're concerned, a go."

The RBQC board -- made up of former Blue Cross CEO Dick Whitmer, former Republican House Speaker Rick Johnson, former Republican Congressman Joe Schwarz and Southeast Michigan attorney Linda Bloch -- hired away Burton from the Michigan Association of Justice, formerly the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association, where he's been the legislative counsel since 2005.

The group formed in October to look at the question of going forward with a ballot proposal. At first, the group had hoped to get the stem cell issue on the 2006 ballot, but simply ran out of time. This go around, the RBQC has until July 7 to get 380,126 signatures on petitions before a question on legalizing embryonic stem cell research can appear on the November general election ballot.

Burton said the language has yet to be drafted and he volunteered no deadline as to when the committee would appear before the Board of State Canvassers to get petition language officially approved.

The type of ballot language the RBQC settles on will be significant. If it mirrors the legislation being pushed in the House by Rep. Andy Meisner (D-Ferndale), it could be framed by the opposition as opening the door to human cloning, which could hurt its chances with the public.

Either way, Ed Rivet of Right to Life of Michigan said his group will work to defeat the proposal as it did in 1998 when it knocked away the assisted suicide question and 1988 when it barred Medicaid-funded abortions.

"The most troubling aspect is that this is so unnecessary," Rivet said. "We had so many breakthroughs in 2007 that cures are going to happen long before they get this cloning research to work."