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Tax Amazon Campaign, Seattle National Lawyers Guild Call On Seattle City Council & WA State to Allow Digital Signature Collection for Ballot Initiatives & Candidates

Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant joins call to uphold basic democratic rights during pandemic

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON -- In a press conference Monday morning, the Seattle Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild and the Tax Amazon campaign called on elected officials in Seattle and Washington State to allow online signature gathering for initiatives and candidates during the pandemic.

“Right now, we are looking at the prospect of democratic rights of Washingtonians being completely upended,” said Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant. “It would be unacceptable if the Secretary of State Wyman and Governor Inslee do not provide viable avenues for democratic rights. I have asked City Council staff to look into whether the City Council can pass an ordinance mandating that online signatures count. My office will be doing everything we can to ensure that democracy is protected, the rights of working people and grassroots campaigns are protected.”

“For the state and the city to fail to accept digital signatures is to elevate and prioritize corporate-backed campaigns and give them even more disproportionate power in our political system than they already have,” said Emily McArthur, with the Tax Amazon movement. “It is scandalous that when our grassroots campaign first reached out to Secretary of State Wyman’s office in late March, we were told over the phone that we should use gloves and hand sanitizer to gather signatures, despite the fact that this would’ve directly violated the social distancing guidelines already in place and been a reckless threat to public health. Then, when we followed up we were told instead that we should gather signatures by sending mass mailings. Mass mailings are extremely expensive and not a viable avenue for grassroots campaigns to exercise direct democracy - the whole point of the ballot initiative process.”

“Direct democracy doesn’t need to be another victim of this pandemic,” explained Lindsey Schromen-Wawrin, National Lawyers Guild Seattle Chapter, “The Governor and Secretary of State could modify the state’s signature verification rules to allow for electronic signatures. In the case of city initiatives in the City of Seattle, the Seattle City Council could modify the municipal code section to allow for electronic petitions. All that could be done in time to not lose

the initiative power in 2020, and potentially into the future depending on how long this pandemic continues.”

The Tax Amazon [ballot initiative](#) would enact a 0.7% payroll tax on the top 2% of corporations in Seattle to raise \$300 million per year for affordable housing and Green New Deal programs. The initiative is supported by a coalition including 350 Seattle, Socialist Alternative, Transit Riders Union, UAW 4121, Democratic Socialists of America - Seattle Chapter, the Tenants Union of Washington, Sunrise Movement Seattle, and WFSE 1488.

“The vast majority of our members reported being rent-burdened, and many are severely rent-burdened,” explained Sharon Crowley, an organizer and member of UAW Local 4121, which represents over 6100 graduate and undergraduate student workers and postdoctoral employees at the University of Washington. “Long before the pandemic struck, we needed more affordable housing options in Seattle. Covid-19 has increased the severity of that need. Workers everywhere have had to adjust what their work looks like, with many facing layoffs, furloughs, and reduced hours. It’s unconscionable that political leaders have not made similar adjustments to protect democracy in these times.”

“We don’t have enough resources to address the triple emergency of a pandemic, housing crisis, and mass unemployment unless we tax Amazon and Seattle’s biggest business,” said Reverend Angela Ying, pastor at UCC Bethany Church. “We have a moral imperative here, for the sake and safety of the people during these unprecedented times, to protect the right to address the needs of our communities.”

Across the country, organizers are evaluating the way forward for signature gathering for citizen-led ballot initiatives and grassroots candidates. In just the past week, [New Jersey](#) and [Massachusetts](#) have made adjustments to accept electronic signatures. As calls grow for online signature gathering, the Tax Amazon campaign has moved forward in [collecting digital signatures](#) from Seattle voters. Similarly, in Michigan, a group called Fair and Equal Washington has [set up](#) a method of online signature collection to qualify their ballot initiative.

As Neil Fox, at-large board member of the Seattle National Lawyers Guild said, “What we are proposing is a sensible and smart way to bring us into the 21st century. We want to change our laws so that people can still participate in the initiative and referendum process while observing social distancing. This is very democratic, it brings our laws up-to-date into the digital age. We allow for digital signatures on many types of legal documents already and during this pandemic we need to use this secure technology to let people participate fully in our government despite the health crisis.”

The full letter of the Seattle Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild in support of online signatures for the ballot initiative and referendum process can be found [here](#) and video of the press conference can be found [here](#).