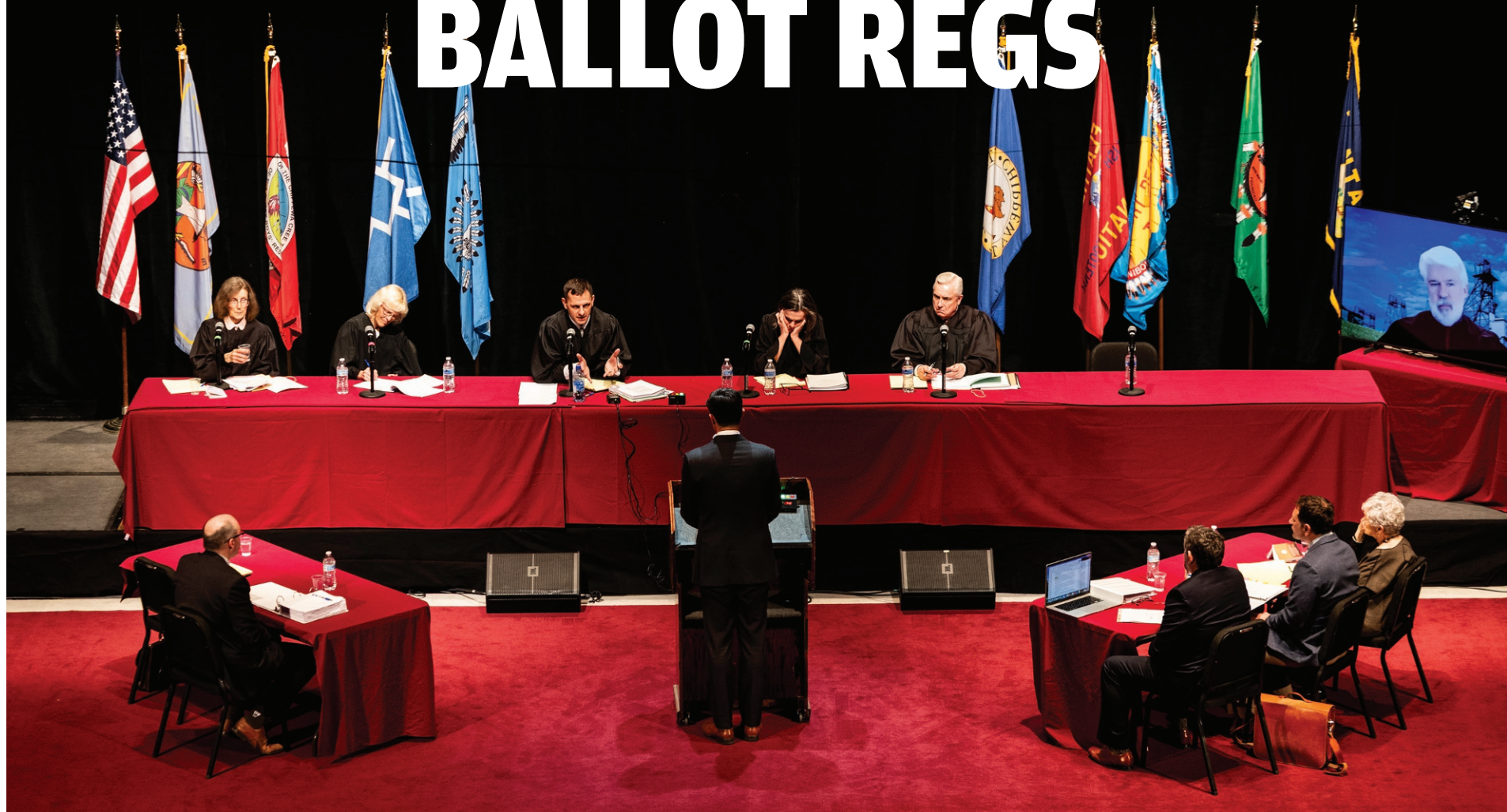


STATE DEFENDS MT CITIZEN BALLOT REGS



BEN ALLAN SMITH PHOTOS, MISSOULIAN

Montana Supreme Court justices hear arguments during the Montana Supreme Court for a lawsuit against a 2023 bill that put additional hurdles on the citizen led ballot measure process in Dennison Theatre at the University of Montana on Friday, April 10, 2026.

State's power to regulate citizens in lawmaking is challenged

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The Montana Legislature's power to regulate citizen-led efforts at lawmaking is at the heart of a legal challenge that played out before the state Supreme Court on Friday.

In a roadshow hearing at the University of Montana's Dennison Theatre, justices heard from attorneys representing a number of attorneys including Mae Nan Ellingson, a delegate from the 1972 constitutional convention who argues new rules on ballot measures create too many hurdles

against citizen efforts at lawmaking.

One such snag is a new \$3,700 filing fee for sponsoring a ballot measure. That was part of Senate Bill 93, a law passed by the Montana Legislature in 2023, which also added a notice of legislative approval (or disapproval) to the measure and a four-year limit before a similar measure could be taken up as a ballot measure if rejected by the voters. Those three items were struck down in district court as unconstitutional, leading to the state's appeal.

Proponents of that 2023 legislation said it was needed to prevent frivolous and

unserious ballot measure campaigns.

The question at hand was whether the new regulations helped facilitate citizen-led lawmaking or whether it impaired it.

Brent Mead, deputy solicitor general at the Montana Department of Justice, argued on Friday that the state's obligation is to the voters, not the ballot measure campaigns that have been bolstered by multimillion dollar funding figures in recent election cycles.

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Justice Beth Baker hears arguments during the Montana Supreme Court for a lawsuit against a 2023 bill that put additional hurdles on the citizen led ballot measure process in Dennison Theatre at the University of Montana on Friday, April 10, 2026.



Chief Justice Cory Swanson during the Montana Supreme Court for a lawsuit against a 2023 bill that put additional hurdles on the citizen led ballot measure process in Dennison Theatre at the University of Montana on Friday, April 10, 2026.

Call for Missoula County to rescind Seeley Lake trail money

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Environmental advocacy groups and local residents urged Missoula County to rescind funding for a new Seeley Lake trail network in a recent letter, arguing the new trails did not receive a proper review and would negatively impact endangered species.

More than 73 signers, including the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Wilderness Watch, and dozens of individuals, said Missoula County should not allocate \$250,000 in open space funds for the trail project, which first broke ground last year.

The letter, sent on April 8, alleges the new 30-mile trail construction proposal was included in a separate Forest Service logging project meant to reduce wildfire risk on Highway 83, which was approved

by Lolo National Forest using emergency fire management rules in July 2025.

"We urge you to step back from this trail development plan until the county and the Forest Service engage in a thorough environmental review and public involvement process that is separate from the Highway 83 project and its approval via the emergency fire regulations," the letter to the county said.

The new trail system is under development by a nonprofit, Scenic Montana Trails, that partnered with the Forest Service to build out the network near Rice Ridge northeast of the town of Seeley Lake.

The Missoulian previously reported the project is meant to increase recreation



VIEW: To see the letter to the County Commissioners on the Seeley Lake trail, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

access in the area, which has faced an economic decline after the closure of its largest employer, Pyramid

Mountain Lumber.

"This is a transformational project for our town, and I think it is a big deal for Missoula County as well," according to Cathy Kahmle, a member of Scenic Montana Trails, who spoke at a county meeting about the project in March.

The trail project's total cost is about \$1.5 million, and Missoula County's \$250,000 was awarded to complete the main portion of the trail network, largely catering to mountain biking.

The letter from environmental groups argues the county might not have authority to spend open space money on projects

located on federal property, and raised concerns around the impact to grizzly bears and Canada lynx.

Both animals are protected under the Endangered Species Act and have habitat in the forests outside of Seeley Lake.

"Mechanized and motorized use is a significant threat to grizzly bears," the letter said, citing U.S. Fish and Wildlife research. "... Unlimited recreation use is a threat to grizzly bears. It also affects other wildlife, soils, water quality and other recreation users."

The letter argues the purpose and need for the trails are unclear, saying Seeley Lake has hundreds of miles of roads for snowmobiles and other motorized vehicles that could also support mountain bikes.

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