January 1, 2008

Bloomberg in ’08? If So, Paper Chase Starts Soon

By KEN BELSON and SERGE F. KOVALESKI

In Colorado, all you need is $500 and you’re in. In Texas, you must gather 74,000 signatures from registered voters within 75 days — and none of them can have voted in the last party primaries.

In Oklahoma, it is more difficult: Your nomination papers must be signed by about 44,000 people — the equivalent of 3 percent of the votes cast in the last presidential election. And those collecting the names must be from Oklahoma.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, eyeing an independent presidential bid, faces a hodgepodge of local requirements to get his name on the ballot in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The mayor’s aides are confident that he can do it, and that he would deploy armies of paid signature-gatherers nationwide if he runs. The foot soldiers are typically paid about $2 for every signature collected, though sometimes higher if their services are in heavy demand.

And with about 650,000 signatures needed nationwide, the bill would come to a minimum of $1.3 million — pocket change for the billionaire mayor.

“You have to have a lot of juice going into this,” said Peter Fenn, a Democratic consultant, who calls the signature-gathering process a “very byzantine business.”

There are plenty of other costs a candidate must consider, most prominently paying for a team of lawyers in each state to protect the campaign from rivals who challenge the validity of the collected signatures. Mr. Bloomberg, like H. Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996, may also rent offices for volunteers and other staff.

There is also the issue of when to get the ball rolling. On Sunday, Mr. Bloomberg will go to Oklahoma to meet Democratic and Republican heavyweights to press for more bipartisanship. His advisers have quietly canvassed potential campaign consultants about their availability in the coming months.

And Mr. Bloomberg, while publicly denying any interest in running for president, has privately suggested that if the candidates from the two major parties are very far apart, he might consider throwing his hat in the ring, according to people close to him.

Political consultants say that while candidates with limited means need to start collecting signatures sometimes years in advance, Mr. Bloomberg has enough money to put off making a decision on whether to run until the end of February or early March.

“He has the potential to unleash the operatives and lawyers to get the job done,” said Scott Reed, a
Republican strategist who managed Bob Dole’s 1996 presidential campaign. “It would take serious coin, but Bloomberg has in the past put his money where his mouth is.”

March is a crucial time because Texas, the first state with a deadline for filing signatures, allows potential candidates to start collecting names only after the primary on March 4. Signatures must be handed in no later than May 12.

In New York, independent candidates need at least 15,000 signatures of registered voters, including at least 100 signatures from each of 15 of the state’s 29 Congressional districts, but cannot begin the effort before the first week of July. Many other states have deadlines in July, August and September. Some, including North Carolina, let potential candidates hand in signatures on a rolling basis.

Independent candidates try to get volunteers to do most of their work. But in states where a candidate has little or no organization in place — and that describes virtually every state in the case of Mr. Bloomberg — they often turn to firms that recruit hundreds of people to troll for signatures.

The best collectors can gather about 1,000 signatures in a week. More signatures than legally required are gathered, because typically, about one-quarter of signatures are eventually thrown out as invalid.

“You get people to go to malls, Main Streets, stadiums, movie lines, anywhere where people are standing around with nothing to do,” said Richard Winger, the editor of Ballot Access News, a nonpartisan news group.

But getting a signature-collection firm is not easy in a general election year, when demand for their services is high. In addition to candidates, groups pushing state ballot referendums often rely on the companies.

“If he’s familiar with how the signature-gathering business works, and he hasn’t already contacted someone, he better do so soon, otherwise he’s got a smoke screen up,” said Carl Towe, the owner of Towe and Associates, which has worked in voter registration for more than 20 years and helped candidates including Mr. Perot get on the ballot in many states. “He’d have time, but a lot of people really start putting the strategies together right after the holidays.”

Stu Loeser, a spokesman for the mayor, declined to comment.

Part of the problem is that each state has slightly different rules for filing.

Leslie Amoros, a Pennsylvania Department of State spokeswoman, said an independent presidential candidate must obtain signatures equaling at least 2 percent of the largest number of votes cast for a candidate in the last statewide election.

That would translate into 24,666 signatures. A candidate can begin collecting the signatures on Feb. 13 and must submit the nomination papers to the Department of State by Aug. 1, Ms. Amoros said.

In Florida, the hurdle is higher. Sterling Ivey, a spokesman for the Florida Department of State, said that an independent presidential candidate would need to collect 104,338 signatures of registered voters by July 15 to get on the ballot.
In North Carolina, the candidate needs enough signatures to equal 2 percent of the number of people who voted in the most recent election for governor, or an estimated 70,000 signatures, according to Johnnie McLean, spokeswoman for the North Carolina State Board of Elections.

The petition must be submitted by the last Friday in June after being filed with the various county boards of elections. She added that at least four of the 13 Congressional districts in the state must be represented in the total. The gatherers have to collect a minimum of 200 signatures from each of the four districts.

A handful of states also prohibit canvassers who are paid on a per-signature basis.

As a rule of thumb, campaigns collect about twice as many signatures as needed, because some signatures are illegible. In other cases, addresses do not match voters’ registration records because they moved since the last election.

The Libertarian Party, for example, starts collecting signatures years in advance in some states. Thus far, it has enough signatures to get a candidate on the ballot in 27 states.