

Chiefs not high on pot legalization

Law enforcement concerned with medical and retail cannabis

By Peter Marcus

DurangoHerald.com | Aug 28, 2014

DENVER – A hearing Thursday that was supposed to address revenue issues surrounding legal marijuana in Colorado quickly took a long, strange trip.

Law-enforcement and state officials spoke of abuses to the medical cannabis system and concerns about normalization of the industry.

Police chiefs sounded defeated at times as they outlined unfunded mandates in their Herculean quest to implement experimental regulations governing a budding industry.

“We have done a pathetic job of training our law enforcement in getting out in front of this to the point where we can teach those law-enforcement officers how to do what they need to do,” said an angry Chief John Jackson, head of the Greenwood Village Police Department and president of the Colorado Association of Chiefs of Police.

He spoke as part of a panel of law-enforcement officers before the Use of Recreational Marijuana Tax Revenue Interim Study Committee, which met for the second time Thursday.

Law-enforcement officials expressed a wide range of concerns, including keeping roads safe from stoned drivers, keeping marijuana out of the hands of youth, organized crime, diversion and unregulated home-grow operations.

“Much of the impact on local law enforcement is still unknown,” said Chief Marco Vasquez, head of the Erie Police Department and a representative of the Colorado Association of Chiefs of Police.

But it was Jackson who stole the show, lashing out at lawmakers for having placed a burden on law enforcement to regulate the infantile industry, and questioning why voters would have supported retail cannabis in 2012.

“People will say things like, ‘I voted for this, but I didn’t really vote for this,’” said Jackson. “Sometimes, it’s uncomfortable to talk about it. Sometimes, it really makes us squirm when we see those news stories where it just doesn’t seem right.”

Marijuana advocates, however, countered that regulating marijuana should be nothing radically new to law-enforcement officials, pointing out that alcohol is already regulated.

Durango is set to implement retail marijuana in the fall.

“Marijuana is not new to our communities,” said Mike Elliott, executive director of the Marijuana Industry Group. “It’s being used and sold across the country, and what we’re trying to do here in Colorado is simply trying to control it through licensing and regulations. It’s not really that revolutionary of a concept. It’s certainly what we did with alcohol.”

Marijuana advocates may also have a fight on their hands over medical cannabis. Officials appear concerned about an abuse to the system, in which patients and caregivers are exploiting the registry with extremely high plant counts.

Doctors are able to recommend more than six plants for patients in certain situations, and caregivers are allowed to grow as many plants as their patients are allowed.

But a lack of tracking has regulators worried that the cannabis is being diverted. Lawmakers are limited in how they address the situation because a right to grow medical cannabis is written into the state constitution. But they could challenge doctors through a rulemaking process.

“There’s a perception that exists out in the community that not all the caregivers are being properly registered,” said Pueblo County Commissioner Sal Pace, a former House minority leader and former 3rd Congressional District candidate who sits on the interim committee.

Officials also continue to grapple with how to run youth-prevention advertising campaigns. A recent partnership between the governor’s office, the city of Denver and the attorney general’s office spent \$1.5 million on a campaign that uses human-sized rat cages, and television and movie-theater ads to warn kids of the potential dangers to smoking pot.

The four cages cost more than \$240,000 to build, and officials are spending another \$623,000 on media and public relations. Other expenses are related to a website, data evaluation and research, design, operations and maintenance.

Some have criticized the campaign for being anti-marijuana and presenting a “reefer madness” viewpoint at a time when teen marijuana youth is actually declining in Colorado. They also point out that traffic fatalities are down by nearly 15 percent since the proliferation of legal marijuana starting with medical in 2007.

Boulder recently declined to bring the “lab rat” campaign to its schools after Boulder Valley School District expressed concerns.

“While the city firmly supports education campaigns to reduce illegal drug use and increase awareness among youth, the city respects the concerns shared by Boulder Valley School District and some members of the community about the use of a human-sized rat cage in the messaging,” read a statement from the city.

But state officials still plan on running the campaign in other parts of the state.

There were three static “public art” installations built and one mobile unit.

“We are very excited to be in discussions with several communities right now about a pending placement, but cannot make a final decision until we are able to weigh all benefits such as exposure, reach, primary and secondary targets,” said Karla Maraccini, Gov. John Hickenlooper’s director of community partnerships.

The cages are placed at Denver Skate Park and Denver Public Library. The mobile installation has also made it to Fort Collins and three Red Rocks concerts. There are no immediate plans to bring the cages to Southwest Colorado.

Hickenlooper’s office points out that the same survey that found that teen use has declined, also found that the percentage of students who perceived a moderate or great risk from marijuana use declined from 58 percent in 2011 to 54 percent in 2013.

“It seems that some folks, when it serves their purposes, lock onto the fact that usage has gone down incrementally in that demographic ... but ignore the fact that it seems like the perception that this demographic has that marijuana is actually harmful has ... dissipated,” said Max Potter, a Hickenlooper spokesman. “That, I think, is equally significant.”