

Alaska mayors group opposes legalizing marijuana

By Laurel Andrews
adn.com | August 28, 2014

A group of Alaska mayors has come out in opposition of the ballot measure to legalize, tax and regulate recreational marijuana in Alaska.

The Alaska Conference of Mayors announced Thursday that it had voted to oppose the initiative during an Aug. 13 meeting in Nome, and pledged to donate \$5,000 to “Big Marijuana. Big Mistake. Vote No on 2,” a campaign opposing the initiative.

At a press conference in Anchorage, representatives of the group voiced concerns over public safety issues, increased enforcement costs and whether legalized marijuana would lead to an increase in social issues such as high school dropout rates, but offered few specifics as to what such issues and costs may look like in their communities should marijuana be legalized.

Three mayors attended the conference at Northwest Strategies’ downtown Anchorage office: Dan O’Hara, mayor of the Bristol Bay Borough; Larry DeVilbiss, mayor of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and DeLena Johnson, Palmer mayor and Alaska Conference of Mayors president. The Alaska Conference of Mayors is a parent organization of the Alaska Municipal League, a statewide, voluntary, nonprofit organization, according to its website.

Out of the group’s 95 members, 23 were present for the Aug. 13 vote. After a “long discussion,” those present voted unanimously in opposition of Ballot Measure 2, O’Hara said.

Palmer mayor Johnson voiced concerns over increased law enforcement costs and public safety issues, although she noted that the mayors don't know what those costs or issues could be. A press release sent out Thursday noted that the Alaska Association of Chiefs of Police has estimated an anticipated \$6 million increase in funding and training needs.

Johnson also voiced concerns that advertising or packaging on marijuana edibles may appeal to youth, and compared the potential packaging to the drug Spice, which the Mat-Su Borough attempted to ban in February.

“I can’t see where it would change for the better in terms of safety,” said DeVilbiss, mayor of the Mat-Su Borough. “Multiplying impaired people is bad public policy in my mind.”

One of the conference’s major discussions was how marijuana would affect rural Alaska, O’Hara said. He said law enforcement is sparse in rural areas, and should the need arise, it could take days for a trooper to get on the ground. Another question was whether high school dropout rates would increase if marijuana were legalized. “I think that’s a fair question for our communities to ask,” O’Hara said.

O'Hara said community leaders in rural Alaska are "very much against" legalizing marijuana.

When asked whether they had seen data to suggest an increase in enforcement costs or public safety and social issues, DeVilbiss said that the lack of information was "one argument for waiting" to see how legalization plays out in Washington and Colorado.

DeVilbiss added that the black market in the Mat-Su Borough would continue to thrive if marijuana were legalized. "The people I've talked to in the Valley have no interest in coming under regulation," he said. DeVilbiss said he hadn't talked to growers, but had spoken with many marijuana users.

He later added that "the producers up here, they're reasonably happy with the status quo."

Taylor Bickford, spokesperson for the Campaign to Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol in Alaska, said that the mayors' opposition to legalizing marijuana was "unfortunate."

"Government bureaucrats have been pushing 'reefer madness' for decades," Bickford said, in a "system that's predicated on misinformation."

Bickford said the black market "won't go away overnight," but over the long run would fizzle out. "There's a reason why you don't have a thriving underground market for alcohol or tobacco in this country," he said.

Bickford said the initiative language compels the state of Alaska to regulate advertising, and that to assume aggressive advertising would flood Alaska before the law was drafted was "irresponsible." Such fears were "reflective of the fact that the mayors group did not reach out to us," Bickford said.

Regulation in Colorado and Washington is working, Bickford said. "We don't need to wait any longer to see that (prohibition) policies have failed."