

Marijuana DUIs on rise, report says

Valley police chief says citations have already more than doubled that of 2012

By Pia Hallenberg

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There's a growing marijuana problem in Spokane Valley.

City Council members listened intently to police Chief Rick VanLeuven's drug enforcement report at the meeting Tuesday evening – the same day nearby Liberty Lake announced it has adopted an ordinance that allows police to ticket minors who are high in public, but not in possession of marijuana.

VanLeuven told the City Council that his department issued 17 marijuana-related DUIs in 2012, but in the first half of 2014 there have been already 37 such citations. The youngest of those drivers was 14 and had six passengers in the car, the chief said.

“There is no public intoxication statute for those who are under 21 and extremely high in public,” VanLeuven said, adding that an ordinance similar to the one in Liberty Lake would be a great tool for his officers.

The number of bizarre yet time consuming calls from stoned residents is also up, VanLeuven said, mentioning an example of a deputy who responded to a 911 call and was met at the door by a man who said someone had broken into his house and switched out his shampoo.

“He then told us he'd smoked a lot of weed and probably just needed to go lie down for a bit,” VanLeuven said, drawing some chuckles from the audience and council members, before he added that these calls take up resources from other more important issues.

VanLeuven explained that it also takes longer to process a driver who has been pulled over for driving high, than one who has been pulled over for drinking too much.

“It takes significant more time to get a search warrant to get the blood draw done when it is marijuana related,” VanLeuven said.

The Spokane Valley Police Department is keeping track of all marijuana-related crimes, and has been approached by a professor from Washington State University as a potential test market for a marijuana breathalyzer that's being developed at the university.

“I think we would be a great candidate for that research,” VanLeuven said.

Council member Rod Higgins wanted to know how a newly opened vapor lounge in Spokane Valley could legally operate next to the Appleway Trail.

VanLeuven said the lounge is members only and doesn't sell marijuana but allows people to bring weed and vaporize it there. A nearby business is advertising for people interested in joining a medical marijuana co-op.

"That all gets a little confusing," VanLeuven said, "but we can't confirm that the lounge is selling marijuana."

The Spokane Valley City Council earlier this year discussed banning marijuana businesses within the city limits. The Tacoma suburb of Fife adopted a similar ordinance on the heels of the passage of I-502 and it was upheld by a state court.

Council member Ed Pace asked what would happen if the city banned marijuana businesses.

"It would be good to know what's the worst that can happen to us if we do that," Pace said.

The city attorney's office will report back to the council with an answer at a later date.