

Medical marijuana lands spot on ballot - Ann Arbor voters to face proposed charter change

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It's official: A question on medical marijuana use will be put before Ann Arbor voters this November.

Final ballot language has not yet been approved, said Ron Olson, acting city clerk, but the petition with 7,000 signatures was certified by the city clerk's office on June 11. City council is scheduled to sign off on the ballot language during its first regular meeting in July.

"We're very pleased with this and looking forward to a very successful outcome," said Charles Ream, a Scio Township trustee who spearheaded the initiative to collect signatures.

The question would ask voters to amend the city charter, adding language to allow people who use marijuana for medicinal purposes to avoid prosecution.

Ream, chairman of the Washtenaw Coalition for Compassionate Care, said medical marijuana advocates were considering a state petition drive in order to put the question before all Michigan voters as early as 2006. Ream added that he hoped federal marijuana laws would change by then instead, however.

The coalition, which also goes by Medical Marijuana in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and Saline, is loosely affiliated with the Detroit Coalition for Compassionate Care, which got a medical marijuana question placed on the August ballot in the city of Detroit.

A previous effort also failed in Ann Arbor in 2000, when the city clerk gave the group of Libertarians behind the effort the wrong deadline to turn in their signatures. They lost a lawsuit over the incorrect information when a judge ruled it was ultimately the party's responsibility to know when the deadline was.

Ream has said the group plans similar initiatives in Ypsilanti and Saline in 2006 and 2008, respectively.

Marijuana laws have been a contentious issue in Ann Arbor since the 1960s, when an antiwar activist John Sinclair was arrested for giving two joints to undercover Michigan State Police.

His sentence of up to 10 years in prison was later overturned on the grounds that it was excessive, but not before some 15,000 rallied at Crisler Arena on his behalf. Out of that rally in December 1971 was born the idea of Ann Arbor's Hash Bash, an annual pro-pot rally focused on marijuana law reform.

In 1974, possession and sale of marijuana was made punishable by a \$5 fine by amendment to Ann Arbor's charter (it was later raised to \$25). In the 1980s, two attempts to repeal that amendment failed.

Today, eight states - Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Nevada, Oregon and Washington - have laws legalizing marijuana for patients with physician recommendations. The sale or use of marijuana is still illegal under federal law.

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