

Medical pot on Detroit, Ann Arbor ballots - Opposition forms to plan to legalize medical marijuana

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Their battle cry is: "Not in my state, not in my county, not in my city, not in my neighborhood."

City and suburban leaders are standing shoulder to shoulder in a unified front to fight a proposal to legalize medical marijuana, which will appear on the ballot in Detroit on Aug. 3.

On the other side of the issue is the Detroit Coalition for Compassionate Care, which advocates marijuana use to relieve the suffering of patients in pain. The group collected the signatures in November 2003 necessary to put the issue on the ballot.

The ultimate goal of the Detroit Medical Marijuana Initiative is to make it legal to prescribe marijuana for those suffering from an assortment of ailments, such as glaucoma, cancer, AIDS and multiple sclerosis. As it stands statewide and citywide, possession of the drug ranks as one of the lowest law enforcement priorities, authorities say.

"Right now, under state law, possession of marijuana is a one-year misdemeanor, but I can tell you from experience that nobody goes to jail," said Jim Halushka, deputy prosecutor for Oakland County, who attended a rally in Detroit on Tuesday with others opposing the initiative from Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

A one-year misdemeanor can mean as much as a year in jail, up to a \$1,000 fine or probation. Possession is a 90-day misdemeanor in the city, resulting in fines, probation or very little jail time.

"I think it's an insult that they're trying to push this in Detroit, a large urban city, Halushka said. "This is the worst possible time to send this mixed message to kids ? that it's OK to smoke marijuana."

But the opposition says the anti-drug group is making a big deal out of nothing.

"I think this whole thing is being blown out of proportion, because there's nothing wrong with cannabis," said Charles Ream, 57, of Scio Township, chairman of the Washtenaw Coalition for Compassionate Care, who has collected enough signatures to have the proposal put on the November ballot in Ann Arbor. "You won't find any doctors admitting that they recommend it, but when I passed out the petition in my Unitarian church in Ann Arbor, I had nurses come up to me telling me how it has helped so many people."

If the proposal passes, opponents said it would largely be symbolic. Users could still face prosecution if they can't prove they have a prescription, and the changes in the city code would not affect current state law.

"People have asked me, why I'm here in Detroit," Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca said during the rally. "This is a regional issue. We don't need this slippery slope to begin in Detroit, because if it passes in Detroit they're going to try to get a statewide initiative like they've done twice before and we stopped them both times."

Doctors in Michigan cannot legally prescribe marijuana, because it's illegal and pharmacies do not supply it. But they can prescribe Marinol, an FDA-approved drug that contains THC, a naturally occurring component of marijuana. Marinol is used to treat anorexia, weight loss associated with AIDS and for the treatment of nausea and vomiting associated with cancer chemotherapy.

Dr. Mark Juzych, associate professor of ophthalmology at Wayne State University, has prescribed the drug for a patient with glaucoma, but he said, "I'm not convinced that it's doing the trick. There's no real scientific evidence that it really does anything."

Juzych said the best treatments for glaucoma are medications, laser treatment and, if those fail, "a doctor can put a hole in the eye so fluid inside drains relieving the pressure."

Detroit City Councilmember Albert Tinsley-Talabi, who also attended the rally Tuesday, said that today, she would present "a resolution to my colleagues to oppose this measure. Marijuana is the beginning of the end for so many of our children and we will not be compromised."

Currently, eight states ? Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Nevada, Oregon and Washington ? have laws legalizing marijuana for patients with recommendations from their doctors. Its sale or use still is illegal under federal law.

How would you vote on the Detroit ballot proposal to legalize marijuana for individuals with a medical need? Share your comments at detnews.com/cybersurveys/

- **Caption:** Community leaders and organizers gather Tuesday for a rally against medical marijuana during a news conference at the Samaritan Center in Detroit.

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