

By Karen Tee  
For the Daily

Although marijuana use is illegal in most parts of the United States, on election day the citizens of Ann Arbor will decide whether medical marijuana should be legalized in the city.

A proposal on the November election ballot would amend Ann Arbor's charter to allow the use of marijuana for medical purposes. If the initiative passes, users who can prove they are using marijuana with the recommendation of a qualified health professional will be exempt from fines or prosecution by Ann Arbor police officers.

Scio Township Trustee Charles Ream, who spearheaded the drive to place this initiative on the ballot, says this is a chance for the city to "send a big message that we want to help patients here, and that it is foolishness that marijuana is not available to sick people."

As much a personal crusade as it is a political issue for Ream, the 57-year-old University alum speaks with great conviction of the efficacy of the drug. In 1968, while in college, Ream suffered from stomach ulcers and gastric pains so severe that he considered dropping out of school. Nothing the doctors prescribed could ease his trauma.

"It was only after a friend gave me cannabis joints to smoke that I managed to take control of my life again. I went back to college, graduated magna cum laude and I've led a successful life since," says Ream, who was a kindergarten teacher for 33 years. Medical marijuana — which some research has shown to treat glaucoma, nausea and loss of appetite — is already legal in nine states, including California, Hawaii and Nevada. Most recently, in August Detroit voters passed an initiative legalizing medical marijuana in the city.

Ream has led the drive to legalize marijuana in Ann Arbor by collecting 7,000 petition signatures, about double the number necessary to put the initiative on the ballot. He paid voters \$1 per signature, using \$5,000 of his own money.

Now, with limited funds left at his disposal, Ream is doing all he can with \$4,000 provided by the Marijuana Policy Project — an organization which works to reduce criminal penalties for marijuana use — and another \$1,000 of his own savings.

Ream wants to run awareness advertisements on AM radio but that plan depends on support from donors. Instead, he has decided to rely on newspaper articles and editorials to make his cause known. A public forum will also be held at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Ann Arbor Oct. 24 at 12:45 p.m. in an effort to make known the medicinal values of marijuana.

In addition to lack of funding, the initiative faces opposition from Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who has made it clear that she does not approve of medical marijuana use. In a letter to the City Council, Granholm said it is still illegal to use, possess or sell marijuana under state and federal law. She said that even if the proposal passes and becomes a city law, state and federal law enforcers would still be able to arrest, charge and prosecute marijuana users, even if they were using prescribed marijuana.

In fact, even if the charter does get amended, the move may be merely symbolic. Lloyd Johnston, a researcher at the University's Institute of Social Research, said, "There has never been a real implementation of laws (to legalize medical marijuana) because the federal law always trumps the state laws, and state laws in turn trump local laws."

Johnston, director of an annual survey of teenage substance abuse, cites the

example of California, where a medical marijuana initiative was passed but rarely implemented. "Federal authorities made it clear that physicians prescribing marijuana risked losing their licenses to prescribe all controlled substances, including all of the traditional psychotherapeutic drugs," he said.

Ream said he refuses to be deterred by Granholm's opposition and remains convinced that more can be done to legalize marijuana for medical purposes. In a written response to Granholm, he said, "Ann Arbor voters don't like it when you tell them that their vote will be ignored." He mentioned Burlington, Vermont, which legalized medical marijuana with an 83 percent majority, prompting the state to adopt the policy, and says he hopes a similar amendment will be approved here.

"People here understand research and the truth. They are too smart to be manipulated by cultural wars," Ream added.

Yet some people doubt that the initiative will have positive health benefits if passed.

Kirk Brower, associate professor at the University's psychiatry department said: "I would vote against this initiative because the issue here is that they want to legalize marijuana joints. I don't think smoking a joint is the best delivery system because along with the active ingredient that has medicinal purposes, smokers also inhale tar and other cannabinoids whose effects have not been researched."

While Brower believes marijuana does have medicinal values, he says drug approval should be left to the Food and Drug Administration and not legalized through a ballot.

"The only reason I feel people would vote for this is to raise awareness about the effects of medical marijuana," Brower said. "However, I believe the proper channel of approval should be through the FDA, which will impose regulations and controls for the prescription of addictive medicines, such as morphine."