

## Leaders aim to gather enough signatures to put issue on 2018 ballot

### New push to legalize marijuana begins

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A N N A R B O R — A f ter more t han 10,000 people gathered Saturday for the 46th annual Hash Bash in Ann Arbor, leaders of 2018 marijuana legalization efforts in Michigan are taking their message across the state.

Former state Rep. Jeff Irwin, D-Ann Arbor, is the political director for the newly formed Michigan Coalition to Regulate Marijuana like Alcohol, which hopes to gather enough signatures starting in May to put the question of legalizing marijuana in Michigan on the ballot in November 2018.

Lansing attorney Jeff Hank is leading the separate MI Legalize 2018 campaign, which also hopes to begin collecting signatures in May.

Whether the two groups unify around one proposal or there will be two separate initiatives remains to be seen.

Both campaigns, along with other organizations, have been working together to draft language for a proposal to legalize recreational use of marijuana for people 21 and older, and to tax and regulate it.

“The situation right now is that we’re all working in coalition. We’re sitting around the same drafting table, trying to come up with language we can all agree on,” Irwin said. “We’re all working together.”

The same draft language is being circulated by both campaigns, and both are asking for feedback from the public before submitting a final draft to the State Board of Canvassers later this month.

The Coalition to Regulate Marijuana like Alcohol said the tentative proposal would include more generous limitations for possession and cultivation of marijuana than any other state, making Michigan “the leader in personal liberties.”

Speakers at Saturday’s rally in Ann Arbor alluded to divisions within the Michigan marijuana legalization movement and encouraged unification. There have been some disagreements over the draft ballot language.

Irwin said he is confident they will be united as one coalition before moving forward in the next month.

“But the proposal will be different than the language MI Legalize proposed in 2016,” he said. “However, that’s not really significant on its own because, if MI Legalize goes their own way, they will change their language, too. It’s two years later, and we learn more from what Colorado, Washington, Alaska, Oregon, Nevada, Maine, California and Massachusetts have done.”

Irwin and Lissa Satori, the outreach coordinator for the Coalition to Regulate Marijuana like Alcohol, are holding informational meetings in Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids this week to discuss the 2018 initiative.

“This initiative will legalize adult use in Michigan for anyone over the age of 21. It includes homegrown, and it includes a first in our nation, a micro-business license,” Satori said at Saturday’s rally in Ann Arbor.

“We’re going to turn this state into the craft state for cannabis and create places for people who are currently caregivers in the medical system and for everyday small businesses in Michigan to be able to flourish in this market.”

The coalition’s discussion in Grand Rapids takes place from 6-8 p.m. today at the Pyramid Scheme. The title of the event is “Regulated Adult Use: A Discussion of the 2018 Marijuana Initiative.”

Before the Grand Rapids event, Irwin and Satori will hold a “coffee with the coalition” event at the Panera Bread at 5119 W. Main St. in Kalamazoo. Anyone who wants to learn more about the initiative may stop by Panera from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

MI Legalize was behind the legalization effort that fell short in 2016 because of invalidated petition signatures.

“In June of 2016, MI Legalize submitted more than 350,000 signatures to place the issue of marijuana legalization before the voters of Michigan. Unfortunately, in a legally questionable move by Michigan’s Bureau of Elections, roughly half of the signatures submitted were not counted,” the group’s website says.

“The right to vote for marijuana in 2016 was stolen from Michiganders. In a federal lawsuit, MI Legalize is challenging the constitutionality of the bureau’s actions, but we won’t wait to find out the results. This election cycle, MI Legalize is coming back with a vengeance. We are not only larger than ever, but we are more organized and experienced as well.”

**CROSSING THE STATE** After a fundraiser Saturday night at the Pretzel Bell’s Captain’s Room in downtown Ann Arbor, MI Legalize plans to hold a series of events throughout the state from April 12 to May 1, stopping in Menominee, Iron Mountain, Houghton, Calumet, Ishpeming, Marquette, Sault Ste. Marie, Muskegon, Traverse City, Royal Oak, Lansing and Kalamazoo.

The tour culminates with a May Day rally at 11 a.m. May 1 on the state Capitol lawn in Lansing.

‘WE HAVE TO UNITE’

“We’re going to take back our house, the people’s house, and we’re going to have those petitions ready, and we’re going to get a quarter-million signatures in a single day,” Hank said at Saturday’s Hash Bash just before he released a pair of white doves symbolizing peace and unity.

“We have to unite, and we have to unite now.”

Chuck Ream, a retired kindergarten teacher and longtime marijuana activist in Ann Arbor, said he helped put together MI Legalize, but now he’s on board with the Coalition to Regulate Marijuana like Alcohol.

“We will have legalization in 2018. The only question is whether we are united or divided,” he said. “We could fairly easily sail to victory in 2018 under the umbrella of the Coalition to Regulate Marijuana like Alcohol.”

Ream said one of the big outstanding issues in terms of ballot language might have to do with the provision for “secure transporters,” which would be people licensed to obtain marijuana from establishments, remit tax payments and transport or otherwise transfer marijuana to establishments.

“Some say this is a sellout to some secure transporter who made a contribution. Others say that it polls well with the public — it may convince the average voter the transport of cannabis will be safe and that all taxes will be collected,” Ream said.

“It certainly does raise costs. Maybe it is a way to get just a hair of the three-tiered liquor model in Michigan without using the whole thing.”

Although the discussion has become complex, Ream said he thinks everybody’s heart is in the right place.

“But what matters are the words on the page,” he said.

A poll conducted by EPIC-MRA earlier this year showed 57 percent of 600 people surveyed in Michigan said they would definitely vote yes, probably vote yes or lean toward voting yes on a ballot question about legalizing marijuana.

Sen. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, has argued the negatives would outweigh the positives if marijuana was legalized for recreational use. A former police officer, he believes it could lead to more crashes on Michigan roads.

“The marijuana that we have today is much stronger than the marijuana many people grew up with in the ’60s and the ’70s,” Jones said earlier this year, arguing it’s dangerous and causes negative health effects.

Jones also said it would increase unemployment “because most employers don’t want to hire people that use marijuana.”

Legalization advocates argue ending marijuana prohibition would stop 20,000 marijuana arrests every year in Michigan, arrests they say unnecessarily disrupt people’s lives and make it harder for them to find jobs.

Irwin said a wide range of people agree marijuana prohibition is a failure, is costing taxpayers too much money, is ruining people’s lives and is contrary to principles of liberty.

Instead of spending large sums of money arresting and locking up people for marijuana, he said, the state should regulate and tax it and use the tax revenue to fund roads and schools.

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