

Tone of hash bash changing

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Focus at Saturday's event will be on marijuana policy reform

News Staff Reporter

Organizers of this year's Hash Bash hope to attract more University of Michigan students and local residents to the annual rally for marijuana policy reform.

The tone of the bash is changing, said Josh Soper, a U-M junior who helped organize the two-hour rally planned for Saturday. It won't be a "smoke-in" as has been the case in previous years, and illegal activity won't be encouraged on the Diag, he said. Live music, a staple of earlier Hash Bashes, will return this year, and the roster of speakers will be more credible, said Soper, director and founder of the U-M chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.

Local college students, who number about 40,000 at U-M, are an untapped demographic whose presence at the bash would help show support for changing marijuana policy, Soper said. Among fellow students and the university community in general, he added, "There's a feeling of sympathy but also apathy toward marijuana policy reform."

But while NORML seeks to legalize marijuana, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America says risks are associated with its use. They include short-term effects, such as problems with memory and learning, trouble with thinking and problem solving, loss of motor coordination, increased heart rate and anxiety, the organization's Web site says. The site also says marijuana smoke contains the same cancer-causing chemicals as tobacco smoke.

This year's Hash Bash speakers include a political science professor from the Flint campus of the University of Michigan as well as Chuck Ream, a Scio Township trustee who led the drive to decriminalize medical marijuana in Ann Arbor last year. Returning speakers include John Sinclair, whose 1969 arrest and imprisonment for possessing two marijuana joints prompted the first Hash Bash, and Chef Ra, a columnist for High Times magazine.

The Bash will also be longer than its usual hour this year, with its formal program running from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. At 1 p.m., activities will move to the Monroe Street Fair for more music and speakers. At the same time, Ream will lead a group to city hall for "a disciplined and peaceful" demonstration in support of medical marijuana rights.

Soper said U-M staff were cooperative in helping NORML reserve the Diag and secure a noise exemption, which allows amplified sound for more than an hour.

However, the University's Department of Public Safety notified NORML late this week that the group will have to pay about \$7,000 for extra police officers needed before, during and after the bash. The notification was so late because the department only found out this week about the addition of bands to the hash bash for this year, said U-M Spokeswoman Diane Brown. She also said DPS only got the name of the student organizer Wednesday.

"It sounds like there was some sort of communication breakdown ...," she said. "I don't know where that occurred."

She said musical acts have the potential to increase attendance at the event, thereby increasing the need for additional police presence. She declined to say how many officers the \$7,000 would pay for.

She said normally if costs are too high for an organization to pay, DPS and the student group would try to come to some agreement. In this case, she said there's not time to do that. But she admitted that DPS might not be able to recoup the entire cost from NORML for this year's rally. DPS did not charge for policing last year's hash bash, she said.

She said other student groups are also required to pay for extra police support for concerts, dances and other special events. She also noted that with budgets getting tighter, DPS has tried to become more consistent about charging the extra costs to groups holding special events.

Soper said this morning his organization will contest the bill, but he didn't know when he will be able to resolve the issue with the DPS.

As for the bash itself, Brown said the university is supportive of information sharing or petition drives, she said, "but illegal activity that often accompanies this event is not welcomed or endorsed."

She said the university must enforce state law regarding marijuana use or possession. Possession carries a penalty of up to one year in

jail and a fine of up to \$2,000. Punishment for marijuana use is \$100 and/or 90 days in jail.

Told about planned changes at the hash bash this year, she said, "If it changes, OK. It hasn't for years."

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