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Measures to Legalize Marijuana Are Passed

By DAN FROSCHE

DENVER — Marijuana proponents scored significant victories on Tuesday as voters around the country passed ballot measures decriminalizing marijuana possession and approved regulatory taxes on the drug.

In Colorado, voters backed a heavy tax on recreational marijuana, which was made legal here last year. The tax will pay for the cost of overseeing the state's marijuana industry as well as school construction.

Voters in three Michigan cities approved measures legalizing the possession of up to an ounce of marijuana by adults on private property, following Detroit and Flint, which passed similar measures last year. And voters in Portland, Me., passed an ordinance legalizing the possession of up to 2.5 ounces of marijuana by adults over 21, making it the first East Coast city to pass such a law, advocates said.

The victories are widely seen as fuel for the legalization movement, which has chipped away at state drug laws over the past decade and has vowed to push for more changes from state legislatures.

"A majority of Americans now agree that marijuana should be legal for adults, and this was reflected at the polls," said Mason Tvert, a spokesman for the Marijuana Policy Project, one of the main groups behind the legislative initiatives across the country.

"There is clearly momentum behind marijuana policy reform," Mr. Tvert said. "We expect to see these kinds of measures passing across the nation over the next several years."

Marijuana supporters saw little opposition during this election cycle — evidence, they said, that public sentiment is shifting in favor of less stringent drug laws.

In Ferndale, Mich., nearly 70 percent of voters approved an ordinance legalizing small amounts of marijuana. And in the city of Jackson, 60 percent of residents approved a similar measure.

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Lansing, where the mayor backed legalization, unofficial election results showed the measure there winning handily, with 8,550 voters supporting it and 5,339 opposing.

Chuck Ream, co-founder of the Safer Michigan Coalition, which has pushed for legalization for years, said he was struck by how easily the local ordinances passed. "They were all landslides," Mr. Ream said.

He said advocates had gained momentum to push for a proposal pending in Michigan's statehouse that would make it a misdemeanor to possess small amounts of marijuana. "We certainly hope that the Legislature will act immediately to pass the decriminalization law for the entire state of Michigan, now that they see that voters absolutely don't support prohibition any longer," he said.

Similarly, in Portland, Maine's largest city, marijuana advocates said their victory — by nearly 30 percentage points — would help persuade lawmakers to pass legislation to regulate marijuana and alcohol in a similar manner.

"We have always viewed this as a first step to bring the sale and distribution of marijuana to Maine," said David Marshall, a Portland city councilor and one of the leading supporters of the new ordinance.

Young progressive voters turned out in large numbers, Mr. Marshall said, helping to widen the margin of victory.

"We were confident going in. We're going to start seeing what steps we want to take to bring this to the next level," he said.

Marijuana remains illegal under federal law, and there is still uncertainty around how local law enforcement officials will handle decriminalization measures passed by municipalities.

In Portland, for example, the city's police chief, Michael Sauschuck, said he would continue to enforce Maine state law, under which marijuana possession of less than 2.5 ounces is a civil offense.

"The ordinance in question really won't affect our day-to-day operations," he said. "Quite frankly, it's really a status quo situation."

Colorado and Washington are the only states to have legalized marijuana statewide, and Colorado's efforts to create a regulatory framework have served as a prototype for marijuana advocates around the country.

On Tuesday, a majority of Colorado voters approved a 15 percent excise tax on the wholesale price of recreational marijuana, and an additional 10 percent sales tax on its retail price.

Lawmakers from both parties, as well as Gov. John Hickenlooper, a Democrat, and the state's attorney general, a Republican, backed the tax measure, which passed with 65 percent of the vote.

"We are grateful voters approved funding that will allow for a strong regulatory environment, just like liquor is regulated," Mr. Hickenlooper said in a statement. "We will do everything in our power to make sure kids don't smoke pot and that we don't have people driving who are high. This ballot measure gives Colorado the ability to regulate marijuana properly."