

Let the people vote!

on a New Approach to Cannabis Policy



Only the General Assembly can place a new issue on the ballot in Maryland, via a constitutional amendment. Unlike the eight states where the voters have decided to tax and regulate cannabis like alcohol, Maryland does not have citizen-referred initiatives. If a bill to place a constitutional amendment on the ballot passes with 60% of the vote in each chamber, the issue will appear on the statewide 2018 ballot for the voters to decide.

Marylanders across the state support this reform. In the most recent Washington Post-University of Maryland poll, 64% of likely Maryland voters supported legalizing cannabis. Support is highest in Anne Arundel and Howard Counties (75%) and among independent voters (66%), although a majority of Republicans (54%) are supportive too.

Voters appreciate having their voices heard. Studies show that ballot initiatives have a positive impact on voter turnout. Initiative campaigns can help engage the public and get out the vote.

Changing cannabis policy for all adults will benefit patients and the medical cannabis industry. Current prices are too high for many patients to afford. While existing medical cannabis businesses will continue to operate, additional licenses are going to be issued — increasing competition in the market and reducing prices. But, the existing businesses will benefit from a head start in the adult-use market.

Taxing and regulating cannabis will create thousands of new jobs and bring in millions in tax revenue. In Colorado, which has a smaller population than Maryland, the state brought in \$247 million in cannabis taxes and fees in 2017. The cannabis industry will also create thousands of good, middle-class jobs for Marylanders; Colorado has issued more than 38,000 current licenses to handle cannabis, and there are many more people working in related fields.

Cannabis is safer than alcohol. The Institute of Medicine has found cannabis to be far less addictive than alcohol or tobacco. Unlike alcohol, cannabis has never caused a fatal overdose and is not associated with domestic violence or other violent crime. Adults should be able to make the safer choice.

Prohibition is more dangerous than regulation. As with alcohol prohibition in the 1920s, since drug-related disputes can't be resolved lawfully, they are settled with violence. Employees in the illegal industry have no workplace protections, such as unemployment insurance, minimum wage, and protection from harassment, and illegal grows often damage the environment. Prohibition also means cannabis won't undergo the quality control testing that it would in a regulated market, resulting in possible contamination by pesticides, fertilizers, molds, or bacteria, or the lacing of cannabis with other drugs.

Regulation keeps cannabis sales away from youth. Regulated cannabis is sold in safe, licensed retail stores, where workers check ID. The most in-depth surveys suggest no increase in rates of youth cannabis use in Colorado and Washington, both of which voted to regulate cannabis like alcohol in 2012. Honest public education campaigns can help reduce teen cannabis use, just as they caused teen tobacco use to plummet 79% from its peak in 1997.

Regulation can also help improve police/community relationships and free up police time for solving violent crimes. As Washington, D.C.'s former police chief put it: "All these [marijuana possession] arrests do is make people hate us." In Maryland, even after decriminalization, over 4,300 people went to court for cannabis possession in 2016. Ending prohibition will move most marijuana sales out of the illicit market and free up law enforcement time and resources to solve violent crimes.

Maryland should change its policies now — regulation doesn't happen overnight. If this initiative is successful, the General Assembly will consider implementing legislation in 2019, and the Comptroller will issue regulations after that. Licensing of new businesses may not begin until 2020.