



Richardson: Why South Carolina should legalize marijuana

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The South Carolina House of Representatives on May 4, at the behest of our state leaders, opted to kill a medical marijuana bill on a technicality. This was despite the fact the bill had broad popular support and that it was the most conservative medical marijuana legislation in the country.

Our leaders have shown, time and again, to be out of step with the times and reality. This bill is no different. Far from embracing a piecemeal approach on the issue, South Carolina needs leaders willing to tap the full economic potential of marijuana. We need full legalization for recreational purposes and pardoning all those convicted of solely marijuana offenses.

Here's why this red state would benefit from going green. Marijuana is one of the fastest-growing industries in the United States. Sales of adult-use and medical marijuana products hit \$25 billion in 2021 and could reach as high as \$100 billion by 2030. Eighteen states have legalized cannabis for adult use, according to U.S. News & World Report. This includes rock-solid conservative states such as South Dakota and Alaska.

States that have legalized marijuana for recreational purposes have seen stronger finances and job growth. Nevada estimates the industry will create 41,000 more jobs and generate more than 1.7 billion in labor income, according to a 2020 review of the economic rise of marijuana. California estimates its total labor income from sales and cultivation of marijuana will top the billions as the state's coffers have been flush with revenues. In Colorado, \$40 million of marijuana tax revenue went to the public school construction, while \$105 million went to housing programs, mental health programs and health programs. In total, the states that legalized marijuana are flush in revenues to spend on their populace.

The whole country is headed that direction. Large portions of the American population support marijuana legalization for medical and recreational uses. Even in Republican states such as Florida, North Carolina, Louisiana and Texas, there is broad support for legalizing marijuana.

Imagine our own marijuana Green New Deal here in South Carolina. Our state could use the money to fully fund the police, provide money for struggling rural schools or grant further tax cuts to small businesses. We could also focus our police forces on prioritizing more serious crimes and on our opioid crisis. It would also allow businesses to train and hire a subset of people with marijuana convictions. An expansion of the pool of labor available makes economic sense given our current labor crisis.

Though the country is rapidly moving toward marijuana legalization, South Carolina has moved in the opposite direction in the past 10 years. As of 2020, South Carolina had the nation's second highest arrest rate for marijuana possession as well as a growing racial disparity in these arrests., according to media reports. Seven South Carolina counties were included in the top 20 counties nationally for marijuana arrests. Darlington County's rate of marijuana arrests ranked fifth in the country. Marion County ranked seventh out of more than 3,000 counties across the United States. These arrests represent millions in state taxpayer dollars in arrests, incarceration, judges, juries and court systems. Arresting people for marijuana possession costs the United States between \$2 billion and \$6 billion annually, according to the Center for American Progress.

The arguments by state leaders against marijuana legalization range from outdated to out of sync with today's South Carolina and today's America. S.C. Attorney General Alan Wilson dubbed marijuana our most dangerous drug, despite the fact that only a few hundred people, if any, have ever even died of a marijuana overdose. However, hundreds of thousands die due to alcohol, tobacco and prescription drugs, all of which are very legal and can be more dangerous.

There are fears legalization will lead to higher crime, but this is unfounded. A study by the Libertarian-leaning CATO Institute found marijuana legalization did not dramatically increase or decrease crime in states where it was implemented. In fact, data from the U.S. Border Patrol shows marijuana seizures have decreased by millions of pounds and are set to their lowest level in a decade. Mexican cartels have lost billions of dollars in illicit sales due to marijuana legalization across the country and South Carolina can help that. Other South Carolina leaders are waiting on the FDA or the federal government to act, but since when has South Carolina ever waited?

During Covid-19, the same people arguing for us to wait on the federal government to decide were the leaders nationally fighting against directives from the federal government. South Carolina's entire history has been about going against the grain. We do not need to wait for the federal government to tell us what we already know: The war on weed is over. Weed won. Now it's time to capitalize on that reality. Where other states fail to bridge the gap between practicality and economic opportunity, South Carolina can go the extra mile.