



House 50 Race Shows Division Between Views on Marijuana

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As citizen efforts to legalize medical marijuana and decriminalize possession of the drug gain traction, the Wyoming Legislature might be the next battlefield for a long-standing debate.

“I wouldn’t be surprised at all if legislators see the changing winds and get out ahead of it (the ballot initiatives being circulated by citizens),” said legalization advocate Bennett Sondeno of Cody. “Generally speaking, legislators don’t want the public to be the ones writing the laws, so I wouldn’t be surprised if we got something through in the coming session. At the very least, it’s going to be a conversation.”

The 2022 election cycle could play a major role in determining what direction the conversation will take next year, said Sondeno, who is also the acting executive director of the Wyoming chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. And while the Legislature remains overwhelmingly conservative, there are hints in many general election races that this may be changing, he said.

“There is definitely that hard-core staunch conservative side, and the Republican party has added the plank that they’re opposed to any sort of cannabis law reform,” Sondeno said. “But legalized medical marijuana has benefited the states around Wyoming, and many people are seeing that. In recent years, we’ve seen voters elect (medical marijuana) supporters who weren’t in the Legislature before.”

In Park County, the division is seen most starkly in the House District 50 race.

On one side is incumbent Rep. Rachel Rodriguez-Williams, R-Cody. On Oct. 11, she attended a Wyoming Citizens Against Normalization meeting in Cody, where she participated in a conversation about the ongoing efforts to legalize THC. THC, or tetrahydrocannabinol, is the primary psychedelic constituent of cannabis and one of 113 total cannabinoids in the plant.

“The attempt to normalize THC in Wyoming is ongoing, as is the attempt to legalize the drug,” Rodriguez-Williams said in a press release about the WyCAN meeting. “It’s not the ‘weed’ of the ‘70s. When states legalize, they open the door to a powerful commercial addiction-for-profit industry that targets youth to create lifelong users.”

On the other side of the debate is her Libertarian challenger Carrie Satterwhite. The citizen ballot initiative efforts to legalize medical marijuana and decriminalize possession are being led statewide by the Wyoming Libertarian party and locally by Satterwhite. She said the marijuana issue was the primary reason she chose to run against Rodriguez-Williams this year.

“I think it’s time to get rid of the stereotypical ‘reefer madness’ idea and look at the science of it,” Satterwhite said. “I think if you do, you will see that there are a lot of benefits.”

The case against legalization ...

Rodriguez-Williams sees legalization as a public safety issue, particularly for youth. Increasing the accessibility of the drug increases the likelihood of its abuse, she said.

“It’s an important subject, and it’s important to me because it affects public health in Park County,” Rodriguez-Williams said.

Rodriguez-Williams isn’t alone in this opinion. She was joined at the Oct. 11 WyCAN meeting by Rep. Dan Laursen, R-Powell, who like her, said he would do everything he could to fight legalization.

“I strongly believe we don’t need another legal vice out there,” Laursen said. “What we’ve seen in other states is that medical marijuana is just a stepping stone, and four or five years later, you’ll have recreational usage. If you want access to marijuana, you can move to a different state. We don’t need it here.”

During the WyCAN meeting, local law enforcement representatives also shared their concerns about potential legalization. Among those present was Park County Sheriff candidate Darrell Steward. Steward, who spent many years working drug cases for the Wyoming Division of

Criminal Investigation, said he shared many of the concerns expressed by Rodriguez-Williams and Laursen.

“I’m concerned about the gateway effects of it,” Steward said. “I was with DCI for a number of years, and one time, we had 101 people charged on a drug case on the Wind River Reservation. Most of them told us their addictions started with alcohol and marijuana. So, yeah, the idea of legalizing marijuana is concerning to me.”

... and the case for it

Satterwhite believes there are real health benefits to the drug.

“I have heard from people fighting cancer and Parkinson’s and other diseases who have received tremendous benefits from medical marijuana,” she said. “I don’t understand why our state is so gung ho about restricting a drug that has proven to be so beneficial.”

According to Libertarian think tank The Cato Institute, medical marijuana advocates hope the pain-relieving element of the drug could help patients avoid more harmful and addictive prescription painkillers and tranquilizers. They also believe the drug can be an effective treatment for bipolar disorder, depression and other mood disorders.

“There are so many substances out there that could harm you and harm others and this doesn’t do that,” Satterwhite said. “The biggest side effect is a feeling of well-being. That’s a pretty good side effect.”

Satterwhite also argued that, while she understood public safety concerns, she feels criminalizing marijuana creates even larger issues.

“I don’t advocate for youth use, and I think we need to educate our children on the consequences of their use,” she said. “But our youth have access to marijuana right now, and we’re kidding ourselves if we think they don’t. So we have to ask ourselves if we want them to continue buying illegally from the black market, which can cause even more problems.”

A statewide shift

Sondeno said he is glad to see medical marijuana supporters like Satterwhite run for public office. It’s just one sign of a shifting statewide opinion toward the drug, he said.

“When we did this (ballot initiative effort) six years ago, it was clear the majority were behind us and two out of three people were supportive of our efforts,” he said. “However, at that time, only one of those two was willing to sign. They were scared about losing their jobs or being judged in some way for signing. What we’re seeing now is that the hesitancy has gone way down.”

The ballot effort, being circulated by the Libertarian party and NORML, would place two initiatives on the 2024 general election ballot, if roughly 45,000 signatures are collected before the 2024 legislative session. Sondeno said he expects to have the necessary signatures by or before that deadline.

The first initiative would establish a medical cannabis program for patients in the state and the other would decriminalize the personal possession of 4 ounces or less of cannabis.

Sondeno said it is estimated, based on responses to the ballot initiative efforts, 85% of Wyoming residents are in favor of legalizing medical marijuana while 75% are in favor of decriminalizing possession.

This correlates with a series of University of Wyoming polls, which have seen support for the legalization and regulation of marijuana increase by 17% from 2014 to 2020. The most recent of these polls in 2020 found 54% of Wyoming residents in support.

“There is no doubt in my mind, if we get to the ballot, we could get it approved,” Sondeno said. “I think the support is there.”

While Satterwhite and Rodriguez-Williams don’t agree on this particular issue, they do agree the topic will come to the Wyoming Legislature sooner than later. And, it’s important for lawmakers to keep a pulse on their community as the discussion moves forward, Rodriguez-Williams said.

“Law enforcement and state legislators need to have continued conversations on what they’re seeing, whether or not there is a prevalence of marijuana use in the community and if there is any harm being done by those who abuse or use it,” Rodriguez-Williams said. “Those conversations are what will guide us forward.”