



What might be in store for Saskatoon once pot is legal?

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Saskatoon is going to pot — or, rather, pot is coming to Saskatoon.

Earlier this week, Mayor Charlie Clark said no final decisions regarding legalized marijuana bylaw changes can be made until the province rolls out its plan. Saskatchewan is the last province to announce a regulatory regime before the July 1 deadline.

So what can be expected at the local level once recreational pot becomes legal, and the province delivers enabling legislation so each municipality can begin licensing retail outlets and cafes? We are not the first country to legalize pot, so we can learn from others to help us understand how pot may affect our community.

Denver is often looked at, since Colorado legalized pot back in 2014 after a public referendum. Last time I checked, Denver was booming economically and socially and ranked very high on quality of life indices.

But what can we learn from Denver that might apply here?

A recent study by the CATO Institute that analyzed legalization impacts in Colorado, Alaska, Washington and Oregon concluded there have been minimal effects on a long list of social outcomes, including: marijuana use rates among adults and youth; marijuana prices; marijuana abuse/related suicide rates; monthly crime rates for violent and property crimes; fatal traffic accidents; standardized high school test scores and drug-related suspensions; housing prices; population growth; and GDP per capita.

Colorado, Washington and Oregon have also seen large increases in state tax revenue related to recreational marijuana — in 2015, Colorado collected \$135 million from licensing fees and levies.

Caution is needed in looking at early results.

A report conducted by the Colorado Department of Public Safety compiled metrics on the potential effects of marijuana legalization on public safety, health and youth outcomes. It indicated that while some data indicate small changes — both positive and negative — in marijuana-related social outcomes, it is still too early to draw conclusions.

Insights from Colorado

Denver has provided some other insights that might be useful in Saskatoon. Here is a list:

Keep the rules simple and don't overregulate — or we'll be amending rules and debating details for hours at committee and council.

Stores will be busy. Lineups may be seen when they first open. In some cases, people waited three hours on opening day in Denver.

Expect expansions. Producers consistently underestimated demand.

Expect a lot of licensing revenue. Vancouver and Victoria have adopted licensing bylaws to attempt to regulate these uses, and adopted high licensing fees — \$5,000 for storefront retailers in Victoria and \$30,000 in Vancouver.

Expect changes to federal and provincial laws. It's hard to get it right the first time, and this may have an impact on local regulations.

Clustering of stores is common. It will be up to the community to decide if this is good or bad. Usually some separation is required from other uses such as churches, schools, community centres and residential.

Some stores may want separation from each other, similar to pawn shops, to mitigate the negative perceptions associated with concentration. Still others might think it is a good idea to keep them concentrated, as opposed to spread, throughout the community.

There is no "typical" customer. Patrons will be in business suits, and people from millennials to seniors will patronize the stores.

Consumers at a Colorado marijuana shop in September 2015. While municipalities cannot ban something that is legal, some might try to effectively ban pot stores through zoning bylaws, says Alan Wallace. (Brenna Linsley/Associated Press)

Pot is a very high-maintenance product. It requires a lot of processing and handling care.

Pot will be regulated more like tobacco than liquor. Similar restrictions on purchasing, labelling and advertising will follow.

Smell can be an issue. It has been mentioned as an issue in mixed-use zones, such as downtowns, where residential and commercial uses occupy the same building.

To summarize, municipalities cannot ban something that is legal, but some might try.

Some may try to use the zoning bylaw to effectively ban recreational pot outlets by only allowing them in very undesirable locations. Many years ago, Saskatoon effectively banned "adult mini-theatres," or peep shows — remember Centrefold across from City Hall? — by permitting them only in IL5 zones.

Saskatoon didn't zone any land IL5.

Here is a fact: prohibition doesn't work (we have that now, don't we?). It is best to keep the laws and regulations simple, and treat these uses like retail stores and cafes. They have to be a more attractive business venture than the underground or black market.