



Escondido Won't Budge On Cannabis Dispensaries Ban

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Despite most Escondido residents voting for Proposition 64 to legalize recreational cannabis in 2016, you still won't be able to find a legal dispensary in the city.

On May 19, the city council voted 3-2 to continue a prohibition on legal cannabis dispensaries. While the county is leaning toward allowing dispensaries in unincorporated areas, Escondido is not alone as San Marcos has a similar ban.

Karla Aguilar said continuing the ban will only hurt those on the bottom rungs of society. People of color have traditionally been targeted by law enforcement during the war on drugs and Aguilar said this will continue to widen the inequity.

"The lack of dispensaries and access to cannabis has become devastating especially for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities who do not have reliable transportation to drive upwards to 30 minutes to obtain cannabis," she said at the meeting.

Marcello Castillo, co-owner of the medical cannabis delivery service Hidden Leaf Collective, was disappointed with the council's vote after he had lined up a location and lease to open a new store in the city. But Castillo said he understands where the council was coming from.

"It really kind of put us down a little bit but then also we had a kind of think about the perspective of why Escondido City had done that," he said. "And we were thinking, well you know it is kind of a good benefit for the for that particular city in some areas too because of the high crimes and things like that."

An increase in crime was one of the reasons some residents said they were against lifting the ban. According to the February 2021 report by the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, violent crimes have neither increased nor decreased significantly in places where cannabis is legal.

There is some evidence, however, that teens are using pot more, post-legalization. A November 2020 SANDAG report shows 57% of teens arrested in 2019 tested positive for cannabis — a 19-year high.

That's the reason why Daisy Ponce, a junior at San Pasqual High School, told the council she does not want dispensaries in the city.

"I get to see a lot of kids intoxicated in class and it's not a good feeling to have one of those things in the class," she said. "Adding cannabis dispensaries in Escondido will only normalize the use of marijuana even more."

But by continuing with the status quo, Councilmember Consuelo Martinez said the city is at risk of proponents putting the measure on the ballot. She, along with Mayor Paul McNamara, were the two dissenting votes.

"I see that dispensaries will eventually come to the city of Escondido," Martinez said. "For me, it's really an issue of do we want to get ahead of that issue and have a say where, how many of those dispensaries it would exist in our city."

By extending the ban, Castillo said the council also missed an opportunity for added tax revenues and jobs in the area.

"It is sad because it will bring a lot more people into the community to spend our money inside that particular city and it will increase the taxes of it," he said.

Michael Morasco, Escondido Deputy Mayor, was not swayed by that argument. He said it's the same principle as not wanting tax revenue from prostitution or gambling.