



What place does recreational cannabis have in Stamford? It's not banned — but rules could come, officials say.

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STAMFORD — Until now, Stamford had played it safe on cannabis. In a sea of towns that have outright banned or placed moratoriums on recreational marijuana sales, the second-largest city in the state has let its existing rules speak for themselves.

There are no explicit rules governing cannabis in Stamford and, according to Mayor Caroline Simmons's office, more rules will come as necessary.

When asked whether the Simmons administration planned to taking a formal stance on dispensaries in the city mayoral spokesperson Lauren Meyer said “the state legislation legalizing the recreational use and sale of marijuana is comprehensive and thorough, and we thank Gov. (Ned) Lamont for his leadership in developing this long overdue and forward-thinking policy.”

“We will continue to evaluate lessons learned as this type of business grows in Stamford to ensure that economic development does not jeopardize equity and public safety,” she wrote in a statement.

In the absence of other cannabis regulations, state law still paves a path forward. The law passed by Lamont in 2021 stipulates that — without other regulations — cannabis in a town or city is governed by its existing zoning rules.

“A cannabis establishment shall be zoned as if for any other similar use, other than a cannabis establishment, would be zoned,” according to the law. And at a Planning Board meeting last month, city officials walked through exactly what that means for Stamford.

At that meeting, an existing medical dispensary, Fine Fettle Dispensary in Stamford's Research Park, sought permission to become a “hybrid” one. According to state law, hybrid dispensaries can sell both recreational and medical marijuana at the same facility.

City planner Vineeta Mathur told board members that Stamford’s lawyers and professional planning staff agreed that the closest use is medical marijuana.

“If we had limitations already, those allow us to restrict the locations, or the use itself,” Mathur told board members. “In absence of that, we need to treat it as the closest similar use.”

“The medical marijuana dispensary use already has limitations in terms of being only permitted in very few places and being strictly regulated,” she continued. Local zoning regulations establish that medical marijuana dispensaries — and subsequently, recreational dispensaries — can only open by obtaining special permission from planning and zoning officials.

Medical dispensaries cannot open “within a 3,000 feet ... of any other dispensary,” and can only open in five commercial and industrial zoning districts throughout Stamford.

Though the Planning Board unanimously approved Fine Fettle’s application and it is slated to be heard by the zoning board in the coming weeks, the approval came with extensive debate. Board members fretted over allowing recreational cannabis sales without formally writing them into city regulations.

“I think if we had known at the time that a medical marijuana dispensary was also going to be allowed to be open to the public for marijuana sale, we may not have allowed medical marijuana facilities to be in the city of Stamford,” Planning Board Chair Theresa Dell said during the meeting.

Fine Fettle already has permission from town officials in Windham and Newington to sell recreational cannabis, according to chief operating officer Benjamin Zachs. All three of his Connecticut dispensaries require permits from the state to start selling cannabis to adults 21 and older.

Getting approved for this license is a complicated process, he said. Companies need to submit proof of their business plans and zoning approvals to get a license. But in municipalities like Stamford, a license is necessary to receive final zoning approval. The conflicting requirements put operators like Fine Fettle in a complicated situation, especially as they move forward in the permitting process.

“What we can do is get all of our ducks in a row, which we’re in the midst of doing and have done,” Zachs said.

Like the Planning Board chair, City Rep. Jeffrey Stella, D-9, is more skeptical of cannabis’s place in Stamford.

Stella has expressed concerns in the past over where people can smoke in Stamford, and in October 2021, he and former city Rep. J.R. McMullen — who now serves on the Board of Finance — floated rules to ban smoking cannabis on school property. (The state cannabis law already bans smoking cannabis “within in any area of a school building or on the grounds of such school.” The state also bans smoking in restaurants, college dormitories and hotel rooms, among other places.)

Stella is interested in seeing more concrete cannabis rules in Stamford, particularly when it comes to where people can smoke.

“I can tell you, if you come down to Leone Park at any given time, you can smell it,” he said. Stella also cites long-term concerns about crime and people driving under the influence.

A 2021 analysis from the nonprofit Cato Institute found that “violent crime ... neither soared nor plummeted in the wake of marijuana legalization” in the 11 states where recreational cannabis is permitted.

Despite assurances from cannabis entrepreneurs like Zachs, who say dispensaries are “incredibly secure all over the country,” Stella wants to see more public debate over cannabis in Stamford. He’s wary of Stamford becoming a haven for cannabis, whereas nearby towns like Greenwich, Darien and New Canaan have banned it.

Though Fine Fettle is looking to sell adult-use cannabis in Stamford, there is still a ways to go before recreational sales begin.

The state Department of Consumer Protection has yet announce who the state’s retailers will be; Connecticut’s cannabis information portal says that recreational “sales could begin in late 2022.”