



Turning A New Leaf

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The College of William and Mary considers itself green, from its school colors to its growing involvement in environmentalism. If a recently introduced piece of legislation is passed, there soon may be another reason for some College students to think of themselves as “green.”

Delegate David Englin, D-45, has proposed a bill in the Virginia General Assembly to study the fiscal effects of the legalization and sale of marijuana in state ABC stores.

Proponents of legalization, like Harvard University economist Jeffrey Miron, argue that legalizing marijuana sales and possession would increase tax revenue and decrease police costs associated with drug enforcement laws.

In a 2010 paper, “The Budgetary Impact of Ending Drug Prohibition,” published by libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, Miron estimated that in 2008, the commonwealth of Virginia spent more than \$125 million enforcing marijuana laws. If those laws were overturned and marijuana had a sin tax levied against it, Miron estimates the commonwealth could expect over \$74 million in additional tax revenue. If Miron’s estimates are correct, the state government would stand to gain as much as \$200 million, which could be repurposed, possibly to be used for higher education or other programs.

Other economists, such as George Mason University economics professor Jon Gettman, argue that Miron’s figures are conservative and the commonwealth could gain as much as \$500 million in additional revenue due to decreased drug policing and sin tax revenue as part of a marijuana legalization scheme.

Both men agree, however, that the criminal underground associated with the sale and distribution of illicit marijuana would, for the most part, disappear much in the same way that bootlegging and speakeasies disappeared after the end of Prohibition.

The Drug Enforcement Administration holds a more pessimistic view toward marijuana legalization. In 2003, the agency pointed to National Institute on Drug Abuse studies that found that the tar introduced to one's lungs after smoking one joint is twice that produced by a filtered cigarette.

The DEA also noted that marijuana would still be sold on the black market, even if it were legalized, just as pills are sold illegally and alcohol is consumed by minors. Finally, the DEA noted that only a minority of drug offenders in state and federal prisons are there due to possession. Most drug offenders are imprisoned due to repeat offenses or dealing drugs.

"Marijuana should be legalized or decriminalized. ... It would become much less of an issue than it is now," Tom Scott-Sharoni '15, a student who spoke at a 2010 Virginia Beach Town Hall meeting on government reform and restructuring, said.

In his statement at the town hall meeting, Scott-Sharoni referenced Miron and Gettman's arguments in favor of marijuana legalization, arguing that the legalization of marijuana would generate revenue through taxes and alleviate the strain on the correctional system.

Marijuana legalization faces stiff opposition in the Republican-controlled House of Delegates. Opponents cite moral reasons or point to the limited scope of the study, referencing its singular view of fiscal matters.

"Do you want to do marijuana? Do you want to do prostitution? Do you want to do gambling?" Republican House Speaker Bill Howell, R-28, said, according to The Washington Examiner. "There are lots of ways to raise revenue, but it doesn't need to be done."

Delegate Michael Watson, R-93, whose district includes the College, referred to the proposed study as "premature and ill-conceived."

“Looking solely at the fiscal impact is a poor measure of whether marijuana legalization would be good for the Commonwealth,” Watson said in an email. “Before we open access to a drug that was previously banned, it is important to have insight into not only the fiscal impact, but also into the medical, legal, and social impact.”

Whatever the impact, it is likely to be magnified at the College. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, college-aged people smoke marijuana at higher rates than any other age group in the population.

According to College crime statistics, between six and 13 on-campus arrests were related to drug law violations per year between 2006 and 2010, although the specific number involving marijuana is not clear.

Even if the commonwealth legalizes marijuana, it does not mean it would be allowed on college campuses.

“Any behavior that was previously illegal and becomes legal may have an impact on how the College defines appropriate behavior,” Associate Dean of Students and Director of Student Conduct David Gilbert said. “The College could still prohibit the smoking of marijuana due to concerns about health and safety. The College ban on smoking in residence halls and other facilities would not change.”