



## **Infighting on Maine marijuana law as push starts for a vote**

**By Patrick Whittle**

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PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — The marijuana wars are on in Maine.

Two sparring pro-marijuana groups are gearing up for spring petition drives that would ask residents whether to make pot legal for recreational use. Veterans of other states' legalization drives — both failed and successful — said the conflict underscores one of the growing pains of the pro-marijuana movement: Divergent pro-pot forces don't always get along.

The Washington, D.C.-based Marijuana Policy Project, the largest group in the country dedicated solely to reforming marijuana laws and a key player in Colorado's successful legalization effort, is leading one charge. The other group is Legalize Maine, and members describe it as a more homegrown alternative. Both groups say they want to bring the issue to voters in 2016.

Both want to create a taxed, government-regulated marijuana industry. But Legalize Maine is framing Marijuana Policy Project as an out-of-state interloper, and organizers for Legalize Maine said their proposal would give state residents preferential treatment when the state hands out licenses to grow and sell marijuana.

Marijuana Policy Project representatives said Legalize Maine's criticism is premature, because the D.C.-based group hasn't even finished drafting its proposal. And while Legalize Maine is digging in for a fight — the group issued a statement that "Mainers don't need a group from Washington DC to dictate what's best for them" — Marijuana Policy Project is stressing cooperation.

"There's more than one way to end marijuana prohibition," said David Boyer, Maine political director for Marijuana Policy Project. "It's an important debate and we're happy to have it."

The groups both want to collect the necessary 61,123 signatures to get their question on the 2016 ballot, but Legalize Maine is further along, having already submitted a citizens' initiative to the secretary of state, which can authorize the group to collect the signatures. Marijuana Policy

Project has been meeting with stakeholders, such as medical marijuana dispensaries, and will likely submit its initiative to the state next week, Boyer said.

Legalize Maine president Paul McCarrier said his proposal will differ from the D.C. group's initiative in key ways, including that Legalize Maine's proposal would create "marijuana social clubs" and allow cultivators to sell directly to consumers.

Boyer said McCarrier's assessment is premature. But McCarrier said his group's initiative is Maine-based and wouldn't be beholden to outside interests, and would regulate marijuana like an agricultural product instead of like alcohol.

"With these large national groups, their agenda will always trump our local interests," McCarrier said.

Such squabbles are not new to marijuana petition drives, said Tamar Todd, director of marijuana law and policy for the D.C.-based Drug Policy Alliance. California, which advocates are targeting for a 2016 ballot initiative, and Oregon, which goes legal in 2015, have experienced similar disagreements, she said. Marijuana Policy Project representatives said they also had to attempt to broker peace among different factions in Colorado's 2012 legalization effort.

"I don't think it's uncommon for there to be multiple players vying for petitions and putting forward different ideas," Todd said. "We have seen some states come together with unity in successful ways."

Medical marijuana became legal in Maine more than 15 years ago. The petition war has alarmed some members of Maine's pro-marijuana community, including Hillary Lister, former director of the Medical Marijuana Caregivers of Maine. She said medical marijuana growers are concerned that creating government regulations for recreational marijuana could result in more regulation of medical pot, because many of the growers would likely be the same people.

But Marijuana Policy Project has been working to gain support for recreational legalization in recent years. The group organized successful city-level legalization initiatives in Portland and South Portland, and another in Lewiston that failed at the ballot box.

State Rep. Diane Russell, a Portland Democrat who has worked to legalize marijuana through the Legislature, said the municipal drives have afforded Marijuana Policy Project a level of trust among voters. She believes the D.C. group's proposal will be more likely to pass than Legalize Maine's initiative.

"At the end of the day, we know legalization is going to pass, somehow," Russell said. "The question is, what kind of policy process do we want and how responsible do the people of Maine think that policy should be?"

In the end, it's possible that all the conflict within pro-marijuana circles amounts to "just noise," said Jeffrey Miron, a Harvard University economics lecturer and senior Cato Institute fellow who studies legalization efforts. Debates about the levels of regulation and local control occur in every state considering legalization, he said. What's more important for the groups is that they present a referendum that voters will approve, Miron said.

"At the end of the day, the goals of these groups are pretty similar," he said. "The main parameters are going to be the same, so the details in these skirmishes tend to be second order."