



Christie's departure creates chance for legal pot

Vincent Jackson

July 30, 2017

When Gov. Chris Christie leaves office Jan. 16, he will take his unbending attitude toward legalizing marijuana with him.

Christie's departure opens the door to expansion of the state's current medicinal marijuana program, decriminalization or even a ballot initiative to have Atlantic City serve as a test case for legalization.

South Jersey lawmakers are open to having marijuana handled in a less drastic manner, but they are cautious.

A study by the Cato Institute, a public policy research organization, examined changes in the rates of marijuana consumption per month in three states where it was legalized: Colorado, Washington and Oregon. The rate of increase in marijuana use didn't change significantly after legalization.

The Drug Police Alliance led the campaign to pass legislation that created the state's medicinal marijuana program.

It is currently working on the New Solutions Marijuana Reform Campaign to legalize, tax and regulate marijuana like alcohol for adults in this state.

Roseanne Scotti, state director of the Drug Policy Alliance, said her organization has been building a coalition within New Jersey while Christie has been governor to have marijuana legalized after his term ends.

"I think it's very possible. ... A bipartisan delegation of legislators went to Colorado," one of the first two states to legalize marijuana, Scotti said.

Most candidates running for governor this fall have a more tolerant view of marijuana than Christie.

Phil Murphy, the Democratic candidate, wants to legalize marijuana, so police can focus resources on violent crime.

Independent candidate Gina Genovese has called for a voter referendum. Libertarian Party candidate Pete Rohrman's platform includes legalizing marijuana.

Even Kim Guadagno, Christie's lieutenant governor and the Republican candidate, has separated herself from Christie on this issue — but she doesn't believe in outright legalization of marijuana, either.

“Our energy is better spent by improving our medical marijuana program and decriminalizing it in some form or fashion so young people aren't thrown in jail for possessing a small quantity,” Guadagno said.

David Knowlton is the chairman of the Compassionate Care Foundation, the marijuana dispensary in Egg Harbor Township.

Compassionate Care is paying attention to what it can do now instead of focusing on what might happen next year, Knowlton said.

The state Department of Health has expanded the conditions for which medicinal marijuana can be used.

“We have been a part of that, and we are expanding to accommodate that,” Knowlton said. “I guess, we will let the chips fall where they may with a new governor and a new Legislature.”

Bills have been introduced in the state Senate and Assembly to legalize marijuana.

Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, D-Mercer, Hunterdon, introduced a bill last year to place the question on a ballot that would allow Atlantic City to adopt a resolution to legalize marijuana within the resort.

“Legalization is just a matter of time,” said Gusciora, who added a simple marijuana possession arrest can result in six months in jail, a \$1,000 fine and loss of driving privileges. “We still equate it with heroin in this state.”

Among South Jersey legislators, state Sen. Jim Whelan, D-Atlantic, has views on marijuana that closely align with Guadagno's.

Whelan was a co-author of the original medicinal marijuana bill and supports program expansion, spokesman Michael Suleiman said.

Whelan supports some form of decriminalization, but does not yet support legalization, Suleiman said.

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, said he doesn't think he could vote for legalization, but he would evaluate a bill that dealt with decriminalizing small amounts of marijuana.

Van Drew said he believes the state's medicinal marijuana program is run well, and it is worth evaluating whether to expand it.

Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo, D-Atlantic, supports expansion of medicinal marijuana and decriminalization, but would like to see some studies in states that already have approved recreational marijuana use for adults before he could support legalization.

“I know it’s great for the states financially — but at what cost?” Mazzeo said.

Assemblyman Chris Brown, R-Atlantic, said he understands the desire to tax marijuana for new revenue and believes it is important to remain open-minded.

“At a time when we are dealing with widespread opioid addiction, we need to make sure we truly understand all of the implications legalizing marijuana may have on our society, such as those thoughtfully considered by Patrick Kennedy in his book, ‘A Common Struggle,’” Brown said.

Those consequences could include increased substance abuse, an added strain on the health-care system and increased underage use, when children’s brains are still developing and most vulnerable to long-term damage, Brown said.