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Legalizing weed in North Carolina gets support from powerful lawmaker

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While allowing the sale of marijuana for medical reasons, the sale of pot for recreational use would remain illegal.

North Carolinians could soon have access to marijuana to treat a host of medical ailments after one of the highest-ranking Republicans in the General Assembly threw his support behind the idea.

State Sen. Bill Rabon of Brunswick County on Wednesday introduced the “North Carolina Compassionate Care Act.” Senate Bill 771 would allow physicians to prescribe marijuana for “debilitating medical conditions,” including cancer, AIDS, Parkinson’s disease, epilepsy and multiple sclerosis.

Rabon is the chair of the Senate’s powerful Rules committee, which gives him lots of sway over what bills move forward in the chamber. He couldn’t be reached for comment Thursday.

The N.C. Department of Health and Human Services would be in charge of issuing registry identification cards to doctor-approved patients 21 and older allowing them to purchase the legal weed from licensed dispensaries, according to the legislation. Cards would not be issued to patients under 18 except in special circumstances.

The proposed bill also notes that as of January 36 states and the District of Columbia had legalized the use of medical marijuana.

“North Carolina now takes similar action to preserve and enhance the health and welfare of its citizens,” the legislation states.

Behind other states

But even with the proposed changes the Tar Heel State wouldn’t be moving as quickly as other Southern states to embrace the growing popularity of pot.

Virginia on Wednesday became the first Southern state to legalize recreational marijuana use, moving up the start date from 2024 that was approved in an earlier version of the legislation to July of this year. That move was seen as a response to concerns over unfair treatment of minority communities under Virginia’s current marijuana laws.

Last year the N.C. Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice recommended decriminalizing possession for up to 1.5 ounces of marijuana for many of the same reasons. The

task force, created by Gov. Roy Cooper, cited data showing the state's Black residents are disproportionately arrested for marijuana possession.

Current penalties for possessing up to a half-ounce include up to a \$200 fine. Having up to 1.5 ounces, around 42 grams, can result in a fine and 45 days jail. Both charges are misdemeanors. Anything over 1.5 ounces of marijuana is considered a felony.

But Senate Bill 711 wouldn't make the recreational use of marijuana legal in North Carolina, and the bill states it would still be illegal to drive while high.

Cash crop

Still, support for legalizing marijuana appears to be growing in North Carolina.

In 2018, a group of Democrats in the General Assembly formed a cannabis caucus to promote reform bills. Easing regulations, members argue, would boost the economy through increased tourism and tax-revenue, help medicinal users manage pain, and bolster racial justice.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, calculated marijuana legalization would bring North Carolina an additional \$125 million in tax revenue.

Many bills, mostly by Democrats, have been submitted this session that would largely seek to decriminalize marijuana possession. And in February Elon University released a poll showing 73% of North Carolinians would support the legalization of medical marijuana, including two-thirds of Republicans. Support for full legalization of marijuana for recreational and medical uses came in at 54%, with most Republicans against the idea.

While the General Assembly has historically been frosty to legalizing weed, the proposed legislation has gained bipartisan support. Along with Rabon and Sen. Michael Lee, R-New Hanover, Democratic Sens. Paul Lowe of Forsyth County and Kirk deViere of Cumberland County also have signed on as sponsors.

“I think this bill, when I read it and saw it, and talked to Bill — Sen. Rabon — it's very detailed, it's very thought-through. And with him being on it as a primary sponsor, I believe it's a bill that will get the conversation it deserves and get to the floor,” deViere said.

Medical marijuana is important in deViere's Fayetteville-area district and its many military veterans, he said. Fayetteville is home to Fort Bragg, the country's largest Army base by population.

“From a constituent standpoint I believe there is bipartisan support to take a step forward with marijuana in North Carolina,” deViere said. Farmers, white and Black residents, and from people of all levels of income have said they support it, deViere said.

Past attempts to approve marijuana

State lawmakers filed bills over the years that sought to legalize marijuana, some for recreational use and others solely for medicinal use. They got little traction.

In 2015, N.C. Republicans Against Marijuana Prohibition pushed to get a medical marijuana bill heard in a House committee.

The organization's president was a veteran from the Fayetteville area. His wife said he used marijuana to help treat Parkinson's disease that they were told developed from exposure to chemicals during the Gulf War of the early 1990s.

The 2015 medical marijuana bill drew opposition from social conservative groups, and the bipartisan committee voted unanimously against it.

The anti-prohibition leader, emotional at the defeat, either tapped or hit a lawmaker on the back or shoulder shortly after the vote. The man was immediately arrested and detained about 30 minutes by the General Assembly Police.

The legislator, Republican Rep. Dean Arp of Union County, declined to press charges and the upset man was released after he wrote a note to apologize.