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Local legislators weigh in on legalizing marijuana

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HARRISBURG—In light of Gov. Tom Wolf’s recent call for the legalization of recreational marijuana use, several local legislators voiced their opinions, with almost all agreeing to some extent with the proposal.

Legalization by the governor is part of his COVID-19 Economic Recovery Legislative Agenda. He suggested that a levy would generate tax revenue for grants for existing small businesses, with 50 percent destined for historically disadvantaged businesses.

Wolf supports “restoring justice” to the convicted and funding of crime victims as a result of legalization. The tax revenue would be combined with $1 Billion in CARES Act funding.

His proposal, however, was met with opposition from Scott Bohn, the former chief of West Chester police who now serves as executive director of the Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association. In an op-ed column published by the Daily Local News, Bohn said opening the doors to unfettered use of the drug would create health problems across the state that would cripple users mentally.

"Given the statistics that are available today, it is clear and indisputable that the use of recreational marijuana negatively impacts the motoring, pedestrian and special needs community and that innocent people in states where recreational use of marijuana has been legalized are at a greater risk of harm, injury and death due to the increased numbers of drug impaired drivers," Bohn wrote.

"Law enforcement executives in the Commonwealth need answers that are supported by valid data and scientific research. Current information validates our concerns and strengthens our collective resolve that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania should not legalize the use of recreational marijuana," he said.

Meanwhile, those legislators contacted for this story mostly expressed agreement with the governor. State Rep. Danielle Friel Otten, D-155th, of Uwchlan, for example, said legalizing marijuana for recreational use,  "has the potential to deliver long overdue justice and restoration to people’s lives, reduce unnecessary burdens on our criminal justice system and provide a much-needed revenue boost for the state.

"Like any controlled substance, legalized marijuana should be highly regulated," Friel-Otten added. "Further developing and regulating this industry has the potential to improve safety and provide much-needed solutions for medical and consumer uses by reducing reliance on opioids; creating strong, environmentally friendly alternatives to plastics; and opening new opportunities for the textile industry. When properly regulated, there is great upside potential for Pennsylvanians."

State Sen. Tim Kearney, D-26th, of Swarthmore said legalization is a good idea.

“We’ve obviously been talking about it for a long, long time,” Kearney, whose district includes portions of eastern Chester County, said. “We need to be careful about it and learn the lessons from other states that have gone before us.

“The COVID-19 crisis has created all kinds of difficulties, with revenue and budget problems. We can’t solve the budget problems with legalizing marijuana, but it’s a step in the right direction.”

State Sen. Andy Dinniman, D-19th, of West Whiteland also favors legalization.

"Over the last several years, there has been momentum growing for the use of recreational marijuana, specifically in relation to its potential economic benefits,” Dinniman said. “The fiscal collapse of the state during this pandemic has served as a catalyst in terms of gaining legislative support for marijuana legalization. I will vote for legalizing recreational marijuana.

“However, I have been a long-time fighter against DUIs in our state, and just as with alcohol, we need to be vigilant in terms of excessive use of marijuana. We need to ensure people use it safely and do not harm others."

State Rep. Melissa Shusterman, D-157th, of Schuylkill would vote to legalize.

“Legalizing recreational marijuana presents us with the opportunity to recover billions of dollars in state budget deficits,” she said. “Filling these gaps will expand the government’s ability to provide essential COVID-19 recovery aid to historically disadvantaged businesses, and decriminalize the minor drug offenses that drain taxpayer dollars and disproportionately incarcerate people of color.

“We have had years to weigh the pros and cons, the time to act is now.”

State Sen. Tom Killion, R-9th, of Middletown, is also on board with legalization.

“The pandemic has been devastating to our state’s revenues,” Killion said. “We need to carefully examine if recreational marijuana sales can help boost our fiscal situation without any long-term damage to residents.

“One of the things I’d like to see in any legislation is expungement for those who were convicted of possessing small amounts of personal use marijuana. These convictions have unnecessarily hurt many Pennsylvanians. If we legalize recreational marijuana, it’s only fair to also expunge old records for small-scale marijuana possession.”

State Rep. Dan Williams, D-74th, of Sadsbury discussed the war on drugs.

“The failed war on drugs produced countless victims to heavy handed, unreasonable drug laws,” he said. “Our Commonwealth needs to begin repairing the damage from this overzealousness and at the same time generate new revenue to invest in revitalization programs that strengthen our disadvantaged communities.

“Bills like House Bill 2050 and Senate Bill 350 are a responsible way to approach this. COVID-19 has ravaged our state’s economy and almost two-thirds of Pennsylvanians support legalized adult-use cannabis. Now is the time for us to act on this significant legislation.”

State Rep. Tim Hennessey, R-26th, of North Coventry, is opposed to legalization without further examination.

“My obligation is to listen to the arguments,” he said. “But I am not initially in favor of legalizing marijuana for recreational use.

“It has only been a few years since Pennsylvania legalized medical marijuana. It’s been too short of a time. We should iron out the problems being reported with medical marijuana and information from other states.”

State Rep. Carolyn Comitta D-156th, of West Chester agrees with the governor.

“The governor’s plan would direct the proceeds to existing small business grant funding, with 50 percent of the funding earmarked for historically disadvantaged businesses,” Comitta said. “Another portion of this revenue would be used to further restorative justice programs that give priority to repairing the harm done to crime victims and communities as a result of marijuana criminalization.

“Pennsylvania is facing a massive budget shortfall due to the pandemic, and the revenue produced from legalization could help close that gap. I look forward to opening the legislative debate."

State Sen. Katie Muth, D-44th, of Royersford responded: “While I generally support the concept of adult-use cannabis, I will only support legislation that includes the release and/or automatic expungement and reparations for individuals with non-violent, marijuana-related criminal records, specific process for safe sale similar to alcohol, and a stopgap to prevent privatization and corporate monopoly. Legalizing adult-use cannabis is an opportunity to engage local farmers and small business in a new market which would expand economic strength.

“Further, the tax revenue generated could help toward Pennsylvania’s post-COVID economic downfall, but this alone will not save our Commonwealth from financial ruin. Pennsylvania’s long history of regressive tax policy needs to be completely overturned. Implementing the Fair Share Tax plan and closing the Delaware loophole to ensure wealthy corporations pay their fair share for using our state’s resource will also need to implemented in order to make real change and achieve economic security for our state’s revenue flow.”

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