News from around the Ojai Valley

Ojai could be first in county to allow medical marijuana providers

Andra Belknap, *Ojai Valley News reporter*

Ojai City Councilman William Weirick introduced a proposal Aug. 9 that would allow for licensed medical marijuana providers to operate within the city.

"Council has heard testimony from dozens of patients, primarily senior citizens, who have testified to the difficulty of accessing these medications that their doctors have recommended," he said.

The proposal encourages the Council to license medical marijuana delivery services within the city limits as soon as possible.

See also: Marijuana study group up and rolling Ojai Valley News, July 21, 2016.

Weirick also supports the creation of a special overlay zone for licensed medical marijuana operations, advocating for the use of the commercial zones east of Bryant Street.

The study group chose the Bryant-Street area because it is the only industrial area in the city and is somewhat distinct from residential areas and tourist zones, according to Weirick.

The study group met thrhoughout a five-week period to develop the "Medical Marijuana Licensing Term Sheet" Weirick presented.

The Council agreed to discuss the proposal during a future meeting; they could not discuss the information Aug. 9 because it was not included on the meeting agenda.

"Cannabinoid substances have medically effective purposes and uses. The research on that is expanding exponentially," said Weirick, who advised the Council to act on the issue quickly, calling it a "moral obligation."

"The structure of the state law and the possibility of Proposition 64 passing, gives a special rationale for the local government to move quickly, to maintain its local discretion and control over its environment," he continued. "We don't want to cede that discretion to the state."

Proposition 64 would legalize the use of marijuana for adults 21 and older in California.

Weirick confirmed Aug. 10 that he has received Council direction to meet with stakeholder groups, including law enforcement, and to discuss the proposal and work City Attorney Matthew Summers on preliminary ordinance language

Jack Patterson, a study group member and recently retired physician, prefers the term "cannabis" to "marijuana."

According to Patterson, medical cannabis is an effective pain-control treatment far superior to opioids.

"Opioids kill people," he said, citing a recent New England Journal of Medicine study that attributed 17,000 deaths during 2015 to opioid overdose.

Patterson said cannabis also is used to treat neurodegenerative diseases, glaucoma, insomnia and depression. He noted that cannabis has been a successful treatment for HIV/AIDS and cancer patients suffering loss of appetite.

Chelsea Sutula, another study group member and industry chair of the Ventura County Cannabis Alliance, said she represents hundreds of medical cannabis patients within the county, and thanked the city for doing "what no city in the county has so far had the courage to do."

Sutula also serves as CEO of the Sespe Creek Collective, a Ventura County cannabis dispensary.

Sespe Creek is classified as a non-storefront dispensary because patients receive their medicine via a delivery service.

Sultula confirmed she serves patients in the Ojai Valley, and estimates approximately 900 people use medical marijuana locally.

Ojai has never had specific regulations in place, Sutula continued, and there's no official ban on the books, but medical marijuana dispensaries and/or delivery services are not currently permitted in the city.

Sutula, her colleagues and everyone who uses medical marijuana in Ojai is in a legal gray area.

"It's a very poorly defined legal environment, it would be responsible to more properly define that environment," said Weirick.

Capt. Dave Kenney of the Ventura County Sheriff's Office received the term sheet during the Council meeting, but did not respond to a request for comment as of press time.