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Coastal pot grows welcomed

County Board of Supervisors considers agricultural marijuana law, holds off on dispensaries

By Samantha Weigel Daily Journal staff 4 hrs ago

Ready to embrace the prospect of a green-tinted gold rush along the coastside's rich agricultural lands, San Mateo County lawmakers agreed to proceed with allowing commercial greenhouse marijuana growing in unincorporated communities — what some expect could be a local \$100 million annual industry.

But the Board of Supervisors stopped short of welcoming other commercial pot businesses. Instead, it agreed to have a more comprehensive discussion focused on sales and dispensaries — an effort particularly focused at ensuring patients have access to medicinal marijuana.

The board met Tuesday for a follow-up study session on potential regulations in response to Proposition 64, voters' landmark legalization of recreational marijuana in California.

Board Vice President Dave Pine noted the shifting times and suggested first focusing on items over which supervisors could agree.

“This is a monumental change in how we deal with marijuana and I think the transition from an illegal system to one that is regulated and has transparency is going to take time. It's going to be rocky to get there, but I think in time it makes a lot of sense. It's going to be safer for users because of regulation of the product, we're going to see less environmental degradation, and today, essentially all the activity is criminal,” Pine said, according to a live video of the meeting.

Supervisors, including the county's former sheriff, were unanimous in their support for allowing regulated commercial growing in greenhouses on the coastside — a prospect local farmers have advocated for and one which the city of Half Moon Bay is also embracing.

The state is expected to start issuing commercial licenses sometime next year and jurisdictions have been enacting a wide spectrum of regulations from promoting commercial operations to restricting medical marijuana.

Locally, regulations span from the city of San Mateo's stringent prohibition on medicinal marijuana smoke in multi-family housing, to the city of Pacifica embracing existing dispensaries and willing to consider more.

County staff is expected to return in September with the proposed ordinance allowing indoor commercial operations in unincorporated coastal areas, such as in Pescadero or greenhouses surrounding Half Moon Bay. Eventually, the county will need to set up its own licensing system as well as environmental, health and agricultural inspections for any businesses in the cities and county.

Supervisors seemed less inclined to try and institute a new locally-controlled sales tax on pot, citing the state's high taxes under Proposition 64 and fears it could drive people toward the black market.

Even so, when it came to allowing marijuana sales at brick-and-mortar dispensaries, the board was split. Some were enthusiastically in favor citing medicinal needs, while others were apprehensive due to concerns about safety and youth.

Supervisor Dave Canepa was the strongest advocate for allowing sales in unincorporated areas of the county, suggesting they host another study session specifically focused on dispensaries.

"The one thing I'm struggling with is on the compassion side. ... I think my position has really evolved, I think there are those people who need access to marijuana," Canepa said, later adding "this is people's medicine, this is what people do for comfort."

But with existing state laws requiring commercial operations be set back at least 600 feet from places like schools, staff noted there may be few unincorporated areas on San Mateo County's Bayside where setting up pot shops are possible.

Supervisor Warren Slocum, whose district includes unincorporated areas like North Fair Oaks, wanted a more cautious approach citing limited information and concerns about the proliferation of too many dispensaries in a small geographical area.

Currently, there are few brick-and-mortar options in San Mateo County with many people heading to San Francisco or San Jose for medicinal dispensaries. Pacifica has a few dispensaries and San Carlos is considering potentially allowing one as well. Most other cities have outright banned commercial operations and outdoor personal grows. The county currently has a temporary ban on all commercial operations and growing pot outdoors. County staff noted they ban delivery services, which are expected to become more widespread.

Supervisor Carole Groom, who also studied the issue as a member of the California Coastal Commission, said safety and keeping marijuana out of the hands of youth should be priorities. Still, she sympathized with the medicinal needs and suggested the county consider whether it could dispense marijuana at any of the county's clinics — which it would need to discuss with the cities in which the facilities are located as most local jurisdictions have banned dispensaries.

"I don't really know where I am on this. I was not in favor of this in the beginning, and the more I learn the kind of less enthusiastic I get. I think with every good idea there's 100 problems that go with it. So I would like to take more time," Groom said, adding she supported proceeding with commercial agricultural growing.

Board President Don Horsley, a former sheriff, is cautiously willing to proceed and suggested staff provide sample regulations for areas like manufacturing, testing and sales.

Horsley, whose district includes the coastside, noted allowing greenhouses to grow marijuana could help revive a dwindling cut flower industry. Still, he wants to preserve farmlands currently growing foods like Brussels sprouts, which are a staple for the region.

Yet he also warned of potential consequences in welcoming an agricultural industry that requires highly-skilled and well-paid laborers to an area that is already struggling to provide enough farmworker housing.

Members of the coastal farming community, many of whom are also active in Half Moon Bay's discussions, urged the board to act quickly as there will be fierce competition once state officials start rolling out business licenses.

Erin Tormey, a farmer in unincorporated Half Moon Bay, said while she may not be getting into the pot business herself, she supports those who are struggling to thrive.

"As a farmer who is in the business of farming one of the singularly most expensive and interesting places to farm in the world," Tormey said, "I'd like to encourage you to expedite affirmative policies that support cannabis cultivation in the county."

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