

2021 Legislative Recap: What happened, and what's next for cannabis in RI?

So here we are — the 2021 legislative session is over and we still don't have legal cannabis in Rhode Island. Some really critical pieces of legislation were passed, and I heard members from both sides of the aisle expressing support for common sense measures that will do right by Rhode Islanders, including prioritizing racial/gender equity in the workplace and in public health spaces, supporting small businesses and embracing principles of harm reduction when it comes to drug use/misuse. There was a sense of understanding of the issues and a willingness to seek out novel solutions, and we have to be proud of what our elected officials were able to pass this session. The process of law-making is a slow one even in normal times, and many important measures can take years to come to fruition. Case in point: legalizing cannabis, an issue that, although it has been discussed at the State House every session for the better part of the last decade, we still haven't been able to get passed.

When the session began, many predicted (again) that finally, *this* would be the year we would legalize adult-use cannabis in Rhode Island. After all, every one of our neighboring states and many others across the country have been legalizing over the last few years, like some sort of reverse manifest destiny domino line stretching from the West Coast all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to that "green wave," changes in the RI legislative leadership and executive branch had legalization proponents hoping for a more favorable atmosphere at the State House, mostly because the conservative-Cranstonite-formerly-known-as-speaker-of-the-house would no longer be the major roadblock he had been for so many years.

What Happened?

It's not news that RI politics is not very straightforward, and this session turned out to be just as messy, if not more so, than what we've seen in the past. Everyone wanted a hand in creating the legislation, but they didn't collaborate with each other and with stakeholders, so we ended up with three very different and far-from-perfect legalization proposals. The governor's proposal was *seriously* lacking, the Senate bill made an attempt but fell way short, and the last-minute House bill endeavored to present the best of both, with some additional improvements when it comes to social equity licensing and automatic expungement. (Check out our recent cannabis coverage for more details on the three proposals.)

It turns out that advocates were right about at least one thing when it came to this session. With Mattiello out of the way, S0568 sponsored by Senator Josh Miller was not only voted out of the senate judiciary committee, but was approved by the full senate on June 20, 2021 — a huge accomplishment, considering that the former speaker never even allowed the issue to be voted on in committee.

I didn't feel the sense of joy that I thought I would at this milestone, particularly because amendments actually made the social equity provisions worse than before (and they weren't very good to start with). I felt that familiar frustration from years past, as if decisions were being made behind closed doors, with only the richest and most powerful sitting at the table. I feared that the rules being written would leave a lot of Rhode Islanders in the lurch, and it didn't sit right with me or the other citizen activists who had been working so hard to make sure that marginalized communities were included in the conversation.

What Now?

Although we came closer than ever before, legalization didn't cross the finish line this legislative session, and it looks like the issue is heading for a special session in the fall. In the meantime, it is critical to keep pressuring lawmakers to do the right thing when it comes to cannabis equity. This is a conversation that will continue to happen post-legalization, and our legal cannabis policies will need to be improved over time regardless, but there are some elements that must be included from the beginning. We need to put our money where our mouths are, quite literally, when we say that we care about all Rhode Islanders. We need to consider the *impact* of our laws and regulations as well as our intentions, and we would be wise to look around (in virtually any direction, at this point) to see what has worked and what has failed in other states. Stay tuned for more updates!