

Opinion: RI Cannabis Blues - Legalize Before It's Too Late

For the seventh straight year, Rhode Island legislators have presented a bill to tax and regulate cannabis, much like the alcohol and tobacco industries are regulated. According to Regulate Rhode Island, the Adult Use of Cannabis Act (2017 H-5555) would replace Rhode Island's existing policy of cannabis prohibition and permit adults over the age of 21 to possess and purchase limited amounts. It would also establish an Office of Cannabis Coordination to develop and oversee regulations and procedures associated with the new industry. This move could effectively take illegal marijuana off of the streets, removing the criminal element associated with black market sales and replacing it with a legitimate business model. In addition, regulation and taxation will help generate jobs and tax revenue, as well as keep cannabis out of the hands of children.

Prior attempts to pass this bill have been met with a "wait and see" mentality, despite watching Colorado and Washington unveil their own cannabis legalization with nothing short of success in all instances. Adolescent drug use has actually declined, and tax dollars have flooded the coffers in those states that have chosen to pioneer the end of cannabis prohibition. Contrary to dire predictions, the sky did not fall and the unemployment rate did not rise. Not to say that there haven't been a few bumps in the road, but those are being strategically worked through and smoothed out for future drivers.

According to a report by John Hudak of the Brookings Institution, the supporting evidence proves that regulation and taxation can work if implemented properly, following Colorado's existing model. Both Maine and Massachusetts (along with Oregon, California, Alaska, and Nevada) have already come to that conclusion since the flood gates opened in 2012 and will be implementing their own systems in the near future. In fact, a majority of Rhode Islanders (59%) support the initiative to end marijuana prohibition, along with members of the state Senate and House across both parties. The fact is, there is unprecedented bipartisan support in the State Capitol suggesting that it would pass if put to a vote, but House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello's office has stated it is extremely unlikely this legislation will be given an opportunity for a floor vote in the House.

So, how is it that this bill with overwhelming political and popular support won't even see a vote? After all, RI legislators have recently voted to pass horrendous business deals that have cost state taxpayers millions of dollars: 38 Studios which could cost taxpayers \$100 million when all is said and done, and the \$550,000 branding investment "Cooler & Warmer" which was the equivalent of flushing tax dollars down the toilet. A new state slogan isn't going to bring people to Rhode Island - you need to improve the economy to do that. Meanwhile, here's a piece of legislation that will actually generate revenue and jobs for the state by taking advantage of a nascent industry that just so happens to currently be the fastest growing industry in the nation. Yet Nicholas Mattiello and his cronies have managed to halt its progress for seven years straight by defying both science and logic, clinging to an 80 year-old belief system without scrutiny.

Unfortunately, there is no straightforward answer to the mind-boggling question of why we are still having a debate over ending cannabis prohibition. In the past, Mattiello has declared that he is not against regulation and taxation, but doesn't want to "rush in" to approving legislation just to beat our neighbors to the punch. To add to the conundrum, his Cranston constituents also support regulation

and taxation by a margin of 58% to 41%. Even Governor Gina Raimondo conceded just last year that she would be open to the possibility of a statewide referendum, allowing voters to make the decision. With similar regulations in place for alcohol and tobacco, precedent dictates that this is not about morals and values. The open-mindedness of legislators suggests that they, too, question the validity of the “Reefer Madness” propaganda used to justify marijuana prohibition. So, why in year seven of this debate have we still not made any progress?

As a Rhode Island voter, you should be outraged. Lord knows, I am. Whether you are a user of cannabis or not, the fact that this state is in desperate need of tax dollars to repair bridges and roads, fund our faltering education system, support our civil service men and women, and pay off the ill-advised debts incurred from those bad business deals mentioned earlier is beyond debate. Colorado tax revenue topped \$70 million in 2015 (according to *Time* magazine) and although the final tally is not yet in, the projected tax revenue for 2016 is expected to exceed \$86 million! That fills a lot of potholes.

However, the thing that Colorado has in its favor that Rhode Island does not is that the closest state with similar legislation is almost 600 miles away. Once Massachusetts implements their recreational cannabis programs, people in Rhode Island will be able to flock across the border and purchase cannabis with absolutely no benefit to our own state coffers whatsoever. The window of opportunity has closed on this deal, and at this point in the game Rhode Island will be struggling to hang on to whatever revenue we can get. Even if you lowball the tax revenue projections, if we legalized two years ago when the research from Colorado proved that it made sense to do so, you can assume that Mattiello’s “wait and see” approach has cost this state at least \$100 million. Let me say that again: \$100 Million!

It is time for Rhode Island voters to take action. Legislators who have opposed the end of prohibition have done so against the will of the majority. In any other work environment these individuals would be fired. I therefore am pleading to the voters of Rhode Island to hold those opposing the bill (H-5555) accountable for their actions. House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello and Attorney General Peter Kilmartin need to understand that they are not only operating in defiance of those who put them in office, but they are willingly placing our state at a disadvantage to our neighbors despite facts and science. It is time that we replace those who refuse to represent our will and put those who would do so in their place.