

Anne Arundel mulls options under state medical marijuana law

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As a delegate, Steve Schuh opposed making medical marijuana available in Maryland. As county executive, he now has to figure out how Anne Arundel County will deal with a law that will soon allow just that.

To consider what to do, Schuh last week convened a roundtable of local officials.

Applications for licenses to grow, process and dispense medical marijuana will become available from the Maryland Medical Cannabis Commission starting in September.

But the new state measure gives local jurisdictions a say on regulating such businesses through their planning and zoning laws. That leaves county officials mulling the impact on residents and on local government.

Schuh will decide if the county will allow the growth and dispensing of medical marijuana and regulate where it can take place — or ban it altogether by amending county planning and zoning laws.

The county executive said Friday he had made no decision yet on what to do on growing, processing and dispensing, but intends to introduce regulatory legislation at the County Council's Sept. 21 meeting.

"The only option not on the table is doing nothing," Schuh said. "It's got the potential to have very significant repercussions for the character of our county."

His opposition to medical marijuana when he was a legislator doesn't mean he can ignore the issue now, he said.

"There are a lot of votes that I didn't support in the General Assembly that I now live with and enforce."

Last week's roundtable included officials from law enforcement agencies, economic development, the health department and the Office of Law.

Under the county code, said county spokeswoman Tracie Reynolds, the cultivation of medical marijuana is permissible in all of the residential, commercial and industrial zoning classifications.

County Attorney Nancy Duden said the county is trying to determine how dispensaries could be regulated. Unlike medical clinics, which provide other medications, such dispensaries would fall under a retail category, Duden said.

The county executive, she said, must decide whether to allow the industry to operate in Anne Arundel and, if so, how to regulate it.

His approach "could vary from rolling out the red carpet to completely banning medical marijuana or anything in between," Duden said.

Law enforcement officials said they were concerned not only about the law but about how much medical marijuana a patient could obtain in a single month.

State regulations allow up to 120 grams — a quarter-pound — to be recommended to a single patient for 30 days. That can be worth up to \$3,500, police said.

Having such an amount of marijuana could normally lead to felony charges of possession with intent to distribute, Police Chief Tim Altomare said.

Altomare said medical marijuana could be administered appropriately. But he said he was still worried about the potential for robberies when people walk out of dispensaries with thousands of dollars worth of the drug. People "will kill people for far less," Altomare said.

Anne Arundel County Sheriff Ron Bateman agreed. Bateman added that medical marijuana cards might be easy to counterfeit.

The sheriff, a former narcotics detective, said he opposed medical marijuana.

"I don't think our legislators did due diligence in checking with the experts," Bateman said. "I don't want this to be a stoner county."

Others focused on the economic development impact. But it's not clear how much benefit there would be to the county, as hundreds of thousands of dollars in license applications and annual fees would be sent to the state.

Bob Hannon, CEO of the Anne Arundel Economic Development Corp., said he's heard from six business owners who are interested in growing, producing and dispensing medical cannabis in the county.

Three, Hannon said, are interested in growing, both in agricultural parts of south county and on industrial sites in north county. Three are interested in operating dispensaries.

Each of Maryland's 47 state Senate districts would be eligible for two dispensaries. Four districts are wholly within Anne Arundel; one is shared with part of Prince George's County.

Hannon said prospective entrants to the medical marijuana business said dispensaries could be put in existing medical offices.

In addition to possible increases in property tax revenue, the county would collect more income taxes from the salaries of any new jobs created. Hannon estimated the county would gain 20 to 50 new jobs in the growing and processing industry and about 20 new jobs involved in operating dispensaries. Salaries would range from \$25,000 to \$50,000.

"The fiscal impact from this is relatively small," Hannon said.

The Maryland Medical Cannabis Commission, said Executive Director Hannah Byron, anticipates that once final regulations are adopted, patient, caregiver and physician registries are created and licenses for growers, processors and dispensaries are granted, patients could have access to medical marijuana in late 2016.

The application period that begins next month will close in mid-October or November. The awarding of licenses will begin by December. Applicants will have to raise capital, secure zoning permission, arrange for construction and hire staff within one year of getting a license.

David Rose, Anne Arundel's deputy health officer, said the local health department could carry out programs to educate the public about the new industry.

Rose said that even if Anne Arundel rules out the growing, processing or sale of medical marijuana here, citizens who seek the treatment can still go to other parts of the state that allow dispensaries.

"There are no borders that function as walls between counties," Rose said. "We're going to be dealing with this no matter what."

The article has been updated to reflect timelines for when applications will be available and awarded.

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