

# THE BEDFORD CITIZEN

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

JUNE 16, 2016

### A Medical Marijuana Dispensary in Bedford

On Monday of this week, a medical marijuana cultivation and distribution company called Seven Points of Massachusetts, Inc. came before the Bedford selectmen to request a letter of support or non-opposition. Marijuana dispensaries must receive such a letter from a town in which they plan to operate. Should the town issue its approval, the proposed dispensary would be located at 131A Great Road.

In 2012, Massachusetts voters approved the use and sale of medical marijuana. Marijuana distributors licensed by the state must be vertically integrated, meaning that they must grow the marijuana that they sell. According to a report on the the state's website dated June 7th of this year (<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/hcq/medical-marijuana/current-status-mmj-dispensaries.html>), Massachusetts has so far approved six companies to cultivate and sell medical marijuana. Approved marijuana growing operations are located in Amesbury, Ayer, Brockton, Franklin, and Lowell. Approved retail dispensaries operate in Salem, Ayer, Brockton, Brookline, Northampton, and Lowell. Eleven additional licenses for new cultivation and retail operations are awaiting approval. However, 173 additional license applications have been submitted and are in various states of the licensure process. Seven Points of Massachusetts, the company wishing to operate in Bedford, currently has three license applications pending.

While the sale of medical marijuana through licensed operations to approved patients is allowed by the law of the land, the issues surrounding medical marijuana are by no means settled.

Some of the issues being debated by state and local governments, medical

professionals, and laypeople on both sides of the issue include the risks of greater use by young people, risks to public safety, demands on state resources to educate the population and to police marijuana policy, correlation between marijuana use and increases in tobacco and other drug use, and lack of long-term clinical trials of medical marijuana.

The issues surrounding the legalization and distribution of medical marijuana pose real challenges. It is important to note, however, that these issues exist in some part because marijuana has been shown to relieve pain, restore appetite, and reduce seizures in people undergoing some forms of medical treatments or who suffer from a number of conditions such as glaucoma and neuropathy. Some argue that marijuana may be a less harmful pain treatment alternative to the opioid-based pain medications currently being misused at epidemic levels and leading to many overdose deaths.

On March 8 of this year, Massachusetts issued a 118-page *Report of the Special Senate Committee on Marijuana*. This report was commissioned by the Massachusetts senate to discover the potential implications of recreational marijuana legalization – an item slated for the November ballot. In its opening letter, the report takes pains to state that while it was not the intent of the committee to make a recommendation, it feels compelled to express “serious concerns” about legalization and sale, and goes on to provide its rationale. And while this report is focused on recreational use, many of its findings and assertions are germane to the issue of medical marijuana as well.

On page 4 of the report, under the headline “Public health concerns”, the first bullet point outlining the committee’s concerns states, “Even with strong safeguards in place, legalization may increase the accessibility of marijuana for youth and contribute to the growing perception among youth that marijuana is safe for them to consume.” As a parent, this finding strikes a powerful chord in me.

When considering whether to allow a medical marijuana dispensary to operate in Bedford, I believe one of the most important considerations is the message we send the young people of our town. By providing a letter of non-opposition, the selectmen could be projecting the message that the highly contentious issue of medical marijuana has been thoughtfully considered, that potential ramifications have been carefully weighed, and that any potential

problems are outweighed by the supposed benefits of making medical marijuana more conveniently available. The message of non-opposition itself may inform the attitudes and beliefs of all residents – especially the young – by leading them to see the town’s acceptance of this business operation as an indication that marijuana may be less dangerous than previously thought. *After all, how dangerous could pot it be if the town thinks it’s okay to have a dispensary on Great Road and that marijuana is being sold as safe medication?*

According to the previously cited senate report, 89 percent of teens in 1991 believed that long- term use of marijuana was harmful. Data from 2012 showed that today only 36 percent feel the same way. Importantly, while there is no medical consensus on the health effects of long-term marijuana use on adults, there is evidence for younger people. Young people who use marijuana experience risks to brain development, lower IQ, memory and learning function.

Several studies cited by Muir Wood, one of the nation’s leading adolescent substance use treatment programs, indicate that marijuana use in teens doubles their risk of depression and anxiety, makes them significantly more likely to have suicidal thoughts, and increases the incidence of schizophrenia in later life. Other studies show a relationship between marijuana use and other substances, including alcohol and tobacco.

Certainly, a medical marijuana dispensary cannot and will not sell products to young people. In fact, these are especially secure and heavily monitored facilities. However, the very idea that Bedford has condoned the sale of medical marijuana could be construed by young people as “normalizing” marijuana and its ‘inevitable’ widespread legalization and use. And, perhaps, as the senate report indicates, this change in attitude could lead to increased use.

We do not yet have enough information nor resident input to make this difficult decision. The risks of sending a message of non-opposition to our many young people seems, at this time, to outweigh the potential benefits of making marijuana access more convenient to patients here and in surrounding towns.

If medical marijuana is to gain full state and federal acceptance, patients and

society would benefit from the clinical trials, quality assurance, dosing controls, and labeling applicable to all other forms of medication. If and when this comes to pass, marijuana would become just another carefully produced and controlled medication available at your local pharmacy. Until that time, many questions remain.

Whatever your view of medical marijuana in Bedford may be, I urge you to please share your thoughts with our selectmen so that they may continue their deliberations with as much information and resident input as possible. The selectmen may be voting on this issue in one of their upcoming meetings.

Kristopher Washington