

California cops, cities offer new medical marijuana bill

By Jeremy B. White
jwhite@sacbee.com

With one eye on a looming effort to legalize recreational marijuana in California, organizations representing the state's cities and police officers are pushing a Sacramento-area lawmaker's bill to regulate medical cannabis.

Assembly Bill 266, by Assemblyman Ken Cooley, D-Rancho Cordova, would set up a statewide regulatory scheme, but local jurisdictions would continue to have the final word on licensing medical marijuana growers and dispensaries.

For years, as legislators offered bills to impose rules on California's teeming medical marijuana industry, law enforcement remained staunchly opposed. The aversion of cops to bills they saw as further legitimizing marijuana helped sway lawmakers to vote no.

That changed last year with a bill backed by the California Police Chiefs Association and the League of California Cities. The legislation failed, but now Cooley is carrying a follow-up bill he hopes will conclude what has become a perennial debate.

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"We keep having Groundhog Day. We keep running these bills and we never get closure on them," Cooley said in an interview. "I am depending on the cities and the police chiefs to be pursuing a community set of rules they feel works from a law enforcement and a community quality of life perspective."

Both Cooley and the bill's sponsors said it is preferable to create a framework for medical marijuana now rather than risk having the rules determined via a legalization measure on the ballot in 2016.

"There is a continuing need to try and enact a regulatory structure that protects local control," said Tim Cromartie, a lobbyist for the League of California Cities, "as opposed to 'let's start from scratch and do our own thing.'"

Cooley's bill would create a two-tiered system in which the state issues a conditional license, dependent on passing a background test and collecting a fee. Local governments would then have to issue the actual licenses for growers, transporters and dispensaries to operate. It would also set minimum standards for quality of cannabis and mandate testing.

"Currently lettuce is more heavily regulated than marijuana, and that is just wrong," Cromartie said.

The bill's supporters emphasize the need to preserve local rules that restrict and even ban the cultivation and sale of cannabis. A separate measure by Assemblyman Reggie Jones-Sawyer, D-Los Angeles, would take a more centralized approach by creating a new marijuana regulation agency within the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control. That is the cannabis industry's preferred formula.

"We think the patchwork of (local) rules will continue on the same problems we have now, the same confusion we have now," said Nate Bradley, executive director of the California Cannabis Industry Association.

Call Jeremy B. White, Bee Capitol Bureau, (916) 326-5543.