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**Wisconsin lawmakers ‘closer’ to legalizing medical marijuana, far from allowing recreational use**

*By WisPolitics.com*

The majority-Republican Legislature is likely to block Gov. Tony Evers’ budget proposal to legalize recreational marijuana in Wisconsin, but a GOP senator suggests medical marijuana could advance.

“The short answer on recreational marijuana is ‘no.’ I’m certain of that. Where we’re at with medical marijuana is probably closer,” said Sen. Kathleen Bernier, R-Chippewa Falls, noting she thinks Evers “knows full well [his proposal] is not going to get through the Legislature.”

Advocates of full legalization say the time is now.

“Frankly, it’s not a partisan issue. This is happening in red and blue states,” said Sen. Melissa Agard, D-Madison. “So Wisconsin will be an island of prohibition.”

Recreational pot is legal in Illinois and Michigan and medicinally in Minnesota, Missouri and Ohio. Wisconsin, Iowa and Indiana only allow use of CBD oil, which is derived from the marijuana plant but does not have intoxicating effects.

In 2018, nearly one million Wisconsin voters in 16 counties and two cities voted in support of nonbinding referendums asking if marijuana should be legal for medical or recreational use. But opposition from Republican leadership has left little hope for legalization in the near future. The Legislature threw out Evers’ 2019 budget provisions that decriminalized marijuana and legalized medical use.

But in the meantime, many municipalities have decriminalized pot, and Illinois and Michigan have opened regulated dispensaries. A Beloit-area dispensary on the Illinois-Wisconsin border opened in July. In November, the Madison City Council legalized possession of up to 28 grams of marijuana on private or public property with permission from the tenant, landlord or owner. Several Milwaukee County Board supervisors support a newly introduced resolution to reduce penalties for possession of 25 grams or less to no more than $1; current penalties in Milwaukee County range from $250 to $500.

Bernier, who introduced a bill to legalize medicinal marijuana in 2019, said lack of research, stigma against marijuana as a “gateway” substance and federal classification of marijuana as a high-risk “Schedule 1” drug are standing in the way of pro-medicinal marijuana legislation.

Agard, who introduced a bill in 2019 to legalize medicinal marijuana and allow Wisconsin residents 21 or older to possess up to two ounces recreationally, said many Republican lawmakers have told her privately they support legalization.

“I have had closed-door conversations over the years with many of my Republican colleagues who do support the legislation but have been told by their leaders that this is not a priority,” Agard said. “They’d be excited to vote for it. But at this point, they feel like it’s not politically prudent.”

In light of longtime pushback from some Republican lawmakers, Agard said the solution is nonpartisan redistricting, which she hopes will result in more accurate representation and eventually, legalization.

“It’s unfortunate that the leaders of the Republican Party in the Wisconsin Legislature continue to be prohibitionist and standing in the way of having this conversation,” Agard said. “We know that [legalization] will create jobs, revenue, support our farms [and] agricultural heritage, as well as help address racial disparities in Wisconsin.”

Republican lawmakers have also criticized Evers’ decision to address legalization through the state budget. They argue it should come through a separate bill.

“You’re going to have pros and cons. You’re going to have people for and people against. And that’s not something you want to put in the budget at all,” Bernier said. “It needs to be thoroughly vetted.”

Evers’ proposal claims legal marijuana could generate more than $165 million in 2023, but Bernier says she worries such a claim could set the stage for larger budget proposals reliant on marijuana taxes. She also raised concerns about the cost of regulating recreational marijuana.

“There are a lot of complicated issues with legalizing marijuana other than you’re going to authorize it to be grown and sold,” Bernier said.“And there’s going to be a lot of money made.”

During a recent WisPolitics.com forum, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, said he supports legalizing medicinal marijuana, but like Bernier, does not want to address the issue through the state budget.

“I’m still trying to find a way that we can do it where people accept the fact that we are not going to legalize recreational marijuana,” Vos said. “I don’t think we have a need to have more drugs in society.”

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