PLANNING FOR POT

Fifteen minutes before Montcalm Township’s public hearing on medical marijuana dispensaries began Wednesday evening, the room was already brimming with people ready to share their opinions. Once the meeting started, it was standing room only and lasted for three hours.

Opinions abound at Montcalm Township medical marijuana public hearing

BY MEGHAN NILSON
Daily News staff writer

MONTCALM TOWNSHIP — The Montcalm Township Planning Commission meeting attracted as a standing-room-only audience Wednesday evening.

With the opportunity to voice their opinion on allowing medical marijuana dispensaries in the township, residents, business professionals and out-of-town medical marijuana buyers crowded the room for a chance to share their opinion on a potential ordinance.

“Our (the Planning Commission’s) job is to look at current and possible future plans for the township regarding residents, people and businesses,” Planning Commission Chairman Dick Karnatz said. “We need to look at everything that’s coming down the pipeline and where it’s going.”

Karnatz said the Planning Commission is neutral on the allowing medical marijuana dispensaries within the township, but they are responsible for gathering information on the public’s opinion.

If approved, allowing medical marijuana dispensaries would mean the township could recoup a 5 percent sales tax and use it for things such as the police department, fire department, schools or however they saw fit.

“The state has passed a law to allow this,” Karnatz explained. “They are regulating it. They are writing the rules for it. The only thing we have to do as a township is to allow it and say how many people we’re going to allow to have it or do nothing, which means it can’t happen here.”

The state law doesn’t become effective until December and Michigan is still fine-tuning the laws for medical marijuana dispensaries. According to Karnatz, one of the more recent laws penalized concerning this issue was to require anyone applying for a medical marijuana license to pass a background check.

Karnatz said he knew of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and cancer patients who have benefited from medical marijuana, but he said there are “some side distractions” which accompany the substance.

“Everything has bad apples associated with it. Alcohol, cigarettes, everything has a bad side to it. That’s just a fact of life,” he said.

As part of the public hearing, the Planning Commission asked Michigan State Police (MSP) Det. Lt. Steven Rau to discuss what law enforcement officials have learned from the legalization of marijuana. Rau’s presentation included information on how today’s marijuana has higher THC levels than in the 1980s, as well as an increase in youth admission rates to rehabilitation centers for marijuana use.

He also touched on the danger of “edibles,” a form of marijuana that is consumed through ingestion. Edibles can take the form of gummy bears or candy bars, which troubles Rau regarding children.

“My concern is that if it’s promoted like this, our kids are going to be drawn to it,” he said. “One of those candy bars is multiple doses, and I don’t know what kid’s not going to eat an entire candy bar.”
Ted Nelson, a former Michigan State Police detective sergeant and a current instructor at the Montcalm Area Career Center, shared his experience with marijuana, saying that marijuana being illegal causes more violence than the drug itself.

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John Kroneck, substance abuse prevention coordinator with Cherry Health, echoed Rau's concern.

"In the states where the medical marijuana is legal, those are the highest rates for youth use," he said.

Kroneck presented a series of self-reported teen statistics on marijuana use. According to his research from last year's Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth (MiPHY), 597 Isabella County residents out of 71,282 residents possess medical marijuana cards. Youth use of marijuana in the past 30 days is 8.3 percent for ninth-grade students and 12.5 percent for 11th-grade students.

The youth use rates increase in Montcalm County where 1,094 out of 62,974 residents hold medical marijuana cards. In ninth-grade, 12.3 percent of students used medical marijuana in the last month, and that number rose to 18.9 percent for 11th-grade students.

However, Robert Hendricks, an attorney with Cannalex Law, said causation does not mean correlation. He asked the Planning Commission to think of how allowing medical marijuana dispensaries would allow the township and the state to regulate and monitor the same.

"Just as the repeal of alcohol prohibition in the 1930s drove out almost all illegal alcohol production, this law will help to eliminate illegal cultivation and sale of medical marijuana and replace it with licensed and taxed medical marijuana," he said.

Other public comments ranged from chronic pain sufferers to former law enforcement officers to health officers, and went back and forth on the risks and benefits of allowing medical marijuana in the township.

Many residents mentioned their concern for local youths.

"I guarantee you that no kid is going to walk through my door," said Kellie Border, owner of BSS Alternative Wellness in Greenville. "As adults, as card holders, we follow the law. We don't want to go to prison."

According to Border, she sells medical marijuana to cancer patients, people who suffer seizures and chronic pain sufferers, like Sue Baxter of Grand Rapids, who has peripheral neuropathy.

Baxter shared how she used to take 900 milligrams of Lyrica every day to manage the pain caused by her disease, but since using medical marijuana she is able to manage her pain and only needs one pill a day.

"I didn't believe in any of this. I never did any of this," she said. "When I did try this for the first time, I couldn't believe how much it helped."

Karnatz adjourned the meeting after nearly three hours; however, the community conversation will continue.

"This was just a chance to see how people feel on the issue, and right now, it seems like there are some misunderstandings on the law," Montcalm Township Clerk Amy Richards told The Daily News. "It sounds like we'll be having more of these meetings."

Richards noted that before an ordinance is approved, the township board will have to adopt it. Montcalm Township Board meetings take place at 7 p.m. on the second Wednesday of every month. A copy of the potential medical marijuana ordinance can be found at montcalmtownship.com/planning-commission online.

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