

Legalizing marijuana would fuel failure

The War on Drugs is a failure. But by legalizing marijuana for adults' everyday use, Oregon would merely compound that failure.

Measure 91 on the Nov. 4 ballot would make Oregon the third state, behind Washington and Colorado, to allow recreational marijuana use.

Supporters of the measure make tempting claims: Law enforcement could concentrate on real crime instead of marijuana. Pot is no worse than alcohol, if that. Marijuana would be brought into the mainstream and regulated instead of being the purview of drug cartels and criminals. Regulation would keep marijuana out of the hands of children and youth. Prohibition did not work for alcohol, and it has not worked for marijuana. Besides, adults should be free to make their own choices.

It is true that marijuana probably is less destructive and dangerous than alcohol and less addictive than cigarettes. Those substances exact a huge toll on America through family and business losses caused by drunken drivers, alcohol-fueled violence and other crimes, disease and other factors.

So ... why would Oregon want to compound that damage by adding marijuana to the mix?

More treatment needed

The War on Drugs has failed because it focused on curbing the influx of drugs instead of curing the demand. Drug cartels would lose much of their grip if our nation focused on drug treatment instead of incarceration.

But Oregon already goes light on individual marijuana users. Medical marijuana is legal. For recreational users, possession of less than an ounce of marijuana is a violation, like a traffic ticket. County jails and state prisons are not full of potheads, unless those people were involved in serious drug crimes.

Marijuana can be addictive. And marijuana can be a gateway drug. Circuit Judge Dennis Graves, who presides over the Marion County Drug Court, sees that often. So do Marion County District Attorney Walt Beglau and Sheriff Jason Myers.

As with alcohol, not everyone who tries marijuana will become addicted. As with alcohol, not everyone who uses marijuana will move on to meth or heroin. But many people will. The typical path for a heroin addict starts with marijuana and alcohol, Beglau said.

For a youth who winds up in trouble, the most common profile is starting with alcohol at age 10, marijuana at 12, and meth or other substances by age 14, he said.

Addiction takes toll

Graves' current court caseload includes marijuana addicts, and he said the drug greatly depresses motivation, fueling a cycle in which the drug users drop out of school, fail to get their GED, go without jobs, and wind up being totally dependent on others for their existence.

Again, not every marijuana user fits that profile, just as not every social drinker drives drunk. But law enforcement officials have legitimate concerns that the passage of Measure 91 would create a climate in which marijuana becomes much more acceptable and thus more easily obtainable by young people.

Drug abuse and mental illness already drive most crime locally. Although Measure 91's tax revenues would provide some funding for law enforcement, Myers said, "It is going to create a lot more problems."

The results from Washington and Colorado have been mixed. The sheriff in King County — the Seattle area — appears in a pro-91 ad, saying marijuana legalization has worked well in Washington, with tax revenue going to schools and police instead of that money going to drug cartels.

Learn from other states

But, for better or worse, Oregon is not Washington. As in Colorado, a black market for marijuana would continue here. Southern Oregon is a prime marijuana-production region — often on secluded federal land — and the drug cartels will not willingly relinquish their plantations. Further, the black market prices would be lower than the taxed and regulated prices for legal marijuana.

Despite the huge black-market marijuana economy, one of the ironies is that legalization's \$35-per-ounce tax would produce relatively little revenue.

Both major gubernatorial candidates, Democratic Gov. John Kitzhaber and Republican Rep. Dennis Richardson, have said Oregon would be wise to learn more from the experiences of Washington and Colorado before contemplating legalization. They are right.

The drug war has failed. But Measure 91 is an even worse "solution."

Endorsements

Throughout this week the Statesman Journal Editorial Board will be making additional recommendations about local candidates and statewide measures on the Nov. 4 General Election ballot. However, to avoid a potential conflict of interest, the Editorial Board is not making an endorsement in House District 23.

Here are the endorsement editorials published so far:

Congress

U.S. Senate: Jeff Merkley-D

5th District: Kurt Schrader-D

Statewide

Measure 86, college fund: Yes

Measure 88, driver cards: Yes

Measure 91, legalizes marijuana: No

Governor: John Kitzhaber-D

Legislature

House District 17: Sherrie Sprenger-R

House District 18: Vic Gilliam-R

House District 19: Jodi Hack-R

House District 21: Brian Clem-D

House District 22: Betty Komp-D

House District 23: No endorsement

House District 25: Chuck Lee-I

Senate District 11: Peter Courtney-D

Senate District 13: Kim Thatcher-R

Marion County

Commissioner Position 1: Kevin Cameron-R

Commissioner Position 2: Janet Carlson-R

Polk County

Commissioner Position 2: Danny Jaffer

Keizer City Council

Position 5: Amy Ripp