

Marijuana legalization takes center stage in Salem



Congressman Earl Blumenauer and Clatsop County District Attorney Josh Marquis debate whether Oregonians should legalize recreational marijuana during a Salem City Club debate at the Willamette Heritage Center in Salem on Friday, Sept. 12, 2014. Danielle Peterson / Statesman Journal



Anna Staver, Statesman Journal

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(Photo: DANIELLE PETERSON / Statesman Journal)

The supporters and opponents of legalizing recreational marijuana in Oregon exchanged barbs but changed few minds Friday during a Salem City Club debate.

The hour long event featured U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Portland, who supports legalization, and Clatsop County District Attorney Josh Marquis, who opposes it.

"Prohibition doesn't work," Blumenauer said.

Arresting, citing and jailing people on marijuana charges costs \$8 billion to \$9 billion nationally, and the Portland Democrat told listeners they have the opportunity to stop wasting their own tax dollars and create potentially millions in new revenue by passing Measure 91 this November.

People may suffer economic hardships that include job loss after a marijuana arrest in other states, Marquis said. But the vast majority of Oregon stops result in citations, which are similar to a parking ticket.

"It's not a crime," Marquis said.

His office prosecuted about 4,200 felony cases in the past year and only three were for marijuana, and less than 100 people are serving time in Oregon's prison system on a marijuana charge.

If Oregon voters pass Measure 91, the sale and use of recreational marijuana for people 21 would be legal starting in 2016. The proposal would allow a person to possess up to 8 ounces of marijuana and to cultivate up to four plants. It would also give the Oregon Liquor Control Commission authority to oversee and regulate recreational sales.

Analysts predict that Oregon sales would generate [\\$16 million to \\$40 million in revenue \(/story/news/politics/2014/08/10/putting-marijuana-revenues-perspective/13810419/\)](/story/news/politics/2014/08/10/putting-marijuana-revenues-perspective/13810419/) for the state annually.

Marquis tried to poke holes in those estimates by explaining how Colorado has lowered its revenue expectations in part because fewer people than anticipated are buying marijuana from a store.

""It's called weed for a reason," Marquis said. "It's not like brewing your own whiskey. It's not that hard to make."

He suspects that even his wife, who supports marijuana legalization, could grow "some awesome weed" in their greenhouse.

"You can grow your own tomatoes," Blumenauer said. "Why would anyone buy an heirloom tomato in a store?"

The Congressman added that the grow-your-own argument missed the point because the people who did purchase marijuana legally would know they were getting a product that was tested for potency and pesticides.

Marquis, a Democrat, also took a jab at the amount of outside spending flowing into Oregon to help the legalization effort.

He compared it to the money billionaire brothers [Charles and David Koch \(/story/news/politics/2014/09/03/merkley-tv-ad-attacks-koch-brother-spending-oregon/15015259/\)](/story/news/politics/2014/09/03/merkley-tv-ad-attacks-koch-brother-spending-oregon/15015259/) have funneled into the Freedom Partners Action Fund to support Republican Senate candidate Monica Wehby.

After the debate, the Statesman Journal asked attendees whether the debaters were able to change their minds. The answer was consistently no.

James Kohn plans to voter in favor of legalization because Oregon's lax marijuana laws encourage the black market, and he thinks legalization would curb that activity.

Pamela Dent disagreed.

She thinks teenagers will still have access to marijuana on the black market after legalization, and nothing Blumenauer said convinced her that the Yes on 90 campaign has a plan to adequately test drivers for marijuana.

William Dettwyler, who plans to vote against legalization, enjoyed the "spirited" debate but nothing he heard changed his mind.

"There is no good reason for it now," Dettwyler said. "To get people stoned isn't a good reason."

Salem City Club debate schedule:

The City Club also plans to hold debates on Measure 88, which asks voters whether to give driver ID cards to people who cannot prove they legally reside in the United States; Measure 90, which would overhaul Oregon's political primary system by opening it up to all voters regardless of party registration; and with the candidates for Oregon's 5th Congressional District.

They are all scheduled for noon at the Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill located 1313 Mill St. SE.

Sept. 26: Top-Two Primary (Measure 90)

Oct. 10: Candidates for Oregon's 5th Congressional District

Oct. 24: Driver ID Card (Measure 88)

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Marijuana debate

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Sept. 11, 2014, 5:15 p.m.