

# Smoke 'em if ya got 'em, as legalized marijuana takes hold

January 30 2017, by Patrick Whittle

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This this Nov. 21, 2014, file photo shows medical marijuana, a pipe, rolling papers and two joints in Belfast, Maine. The first tangible results of state voters' decision to legalize marijuana are being felt as possession and home growth of marijuana becomes legal Monday, Jan. 30, 2017. Voters narrowly passed the ballot question in November, and the waiting period between the vote and legalization has expired. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty, File)

It was a green Monday in Maine.

The first tangible results of state voters' decision to legalize marijuana were felt as possession and home growth of marijuana became legal. Voters narrowly passed the ballot question in November, and the waiting period between the vote and legalization has expired.

Contentious aspects linger, including what rules should govern businesses that will sell marijuana, such as retail stores and social clubs. The Legislature has been hammering out those details, and they will take months to fully craft, meaning it will be months before marijuana businesses open in the state.

But it's legal to smoke it as of Monday. It's also legal to gift it, grow it and possess up to 2.5 ounces of it.

Westbrook resident Steve Richard, a 40-year smoker of marijuana, availed himself of the new law at the stroke of midnight.

"Burned my first legal 'J' on my front porch. I tried to get others to join me, but it was late," Richard said.

The marijuana legalization vote was close, passing by only about 4,000 votes, and opponents of the spread of marijuana have vowed to continue to push for restrictions in the state.

Legalization also sparked a row between legislators and Republican Gov. Paul LePage. Lawmakers on Jan. 26 unanimously approved legislation delaying the retail sale of marijuana until February 2018.

But LePage at first declined to sign off on such a delay because of concerns he has about funding and oversight. He ended up signing it Jan. 27. On Monday, he issued an executive order to shift oversight of marijuana to the Bureau of Alcoholic Beverages and Lottery Operations.

LePage also closed a loophole that could have allowed Mainers under 21 to possess pot.

Cities and towns have also considered moratoriums on the establishment of marijuana businesses, and some have already approved such temporary bans. Many local officials have said they don't want to get into the business of issuing marijuana licenses until the state rules are firmly in place.

Scott Gagnon, chairman of Mainers Protecting Our Youth and Communities, said communities are right to be cautious about whether they will allow sales within their borders. He said his group and other advocates will push for public safety as rulemaking goes forward.

"We've gone from a campaign to doing everything we can to mitigate the risk," Gagnon said. "The statehouse will provide the voice for the half of Maine that said no to Question One."

Pro-marijuana campaigners said they will also have a place at the table when retail laws are crafted.

"It's huge. No longer will we be punishing adults for using a safer substance than alcohol," said David Boyer, campaign manager for the ballot question. "We're not making criminals out of thousands of Mainers who choose to use marijuana."

Massachusetts, California and Nevada also legalized recreational marijuana with a referendum last year.

Maine also has a long-standing medical marijuana program, and supporters of recreational pot have vowed that broader legalization will not interfere with it.

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