

Vermont governor vetoes marijuana bill, wants changes made

May 24 2017, by Lisa Rathke

Republican Gov. Phil Scott on Wednesday vetoed a bill that would have made Vermont the ninth state to legalize recreational marijuana but indicated that he was willing to work with the Legislature on a compromise.

Scott said he was sending the bill back with suggestions for another path forward and called for changes to be made to the proposal, such as more aggressive penalties for smoking pot while driving or in the presence of children.

"We must get this right," said Scott, who is hoping the Legislature can make the fixes during a veto session in late June.

Scott has said he's not philosophically opposed to marijuana legalization but has concerns about public safety, children's health and how to measure impaired drivers.

Under the legislation, small amounts of marijuana would have been legal to possess and grow for anyone over age 21.

Eight other states, plus the District of Columbia, have legalized recreational marijuana. Vermont would have been the first state to legalize marijuana by vote of a state legislative body. The other states and D.C. legalized marijuana after public referendums.

Legalization advocates said that although they were disappointed by the

veto, they were encouraged there's a path forward.

"We are all concerned about youth safety and roadside safety," said Laura Subin, director of the Vermont Coalition to Regulate Marijuana. "We hope we can work with the governor and the legislature to come up with a proposal that reflects those priorities."

Studies by the Vermont Department of Health have found that Vermont has among the highest prevalence of marijuana use in the country and the second-highest use among people ages 12 to 25.

Vermont's legislature passed the measure six months after residents in Massachusetts and Maine voted to legalize the recreational use of marijuana. Both states are now developing mechanisms to regulate and tax the sale of marijuana. The New Hampshire Legislature is considering a bill to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of marijuana.

Besides seeking more aggressive penalties for people who smoke marijuana while driving or while in the presence of children, he is also calling for an expansion of a commission that would develop a proposal to tax and regulate marijuana. He wants it to include representatives from the Vermont departments of Public Safety, Health and Taxes as well as the substance abuse prevention and treatment community. He says the panel should have a year before making recommendations.

Nearly 20 states have bills pending that would legalize marijuana for adults, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

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