

“MAINE FIRST” CAMPAIGN TO END PROHIBITION

On April 20, 2011, Representative Diane Russell of the Maine House of Representatives introduced legislation that would terminate the prohibition of cannabis-hemp in Maine. Following are her remarks:

As a lawmaker, I have a responsibility to see - and deal with - the world as it is, and judge public policy on evidenced-based analysis. It is with this in mind that today I stand with supporters to kick off the Maine First Campaign and formally release LD 1453, “An Act to Legalize and Tax Marijuana.”

First and foremost, LD 1453 changes the paradigm of how we look at drug policy. It is time to see these policies through the lens of public health, and not through the lens of the criminal justice system. It is time to start treating addiction as a mental health issue and not a criminal justice issue. Painkillers are the drugs killing Maine people so why are we spending about \$26 million per year in Maine to root out, prosecute and jail people for the possession and sale of marijuana? Let’s channel that money toward the real drugs at the core of our addiction issue in Maine.

Second, this bill was designed to protect children. Currently, we have absolutely no control over the marijuana market. In fact, since we have attempted to control the market through prohibition, access to marijuana has increased. As a result, not only is marijuana readily accessible to young people ages 12 to 17, many are even selling it to their friends. This bill creates a regulatory structure to limit access to marijuana for people under the age of 21. There are safe havens around schools, consequences for selling to a minor and prohibitions against marketing to youth.

Third, this bill would bring (Maine) an estimated \$8.5 million in new sales tax revenue on commercial sales. This revenue does not account for the new income tax revenue that would be generated when black market operations come onto the books and “above the table.”

Our economy is still reeling from the Great Recession. Why are we turning a blind eye to sales and income tax revenue that could be used to make the types of investments we need to build a strong economy - such as investments in farming, land preservation, weatherization, community policing and higher education?

Fourth, people talk about marijuana being a “gateway drug.” Marijuana isn’t the gateway... the drug dealer is. If I’m a drug dealer, I want to get you to buy a more expensive product - and if I can get you to try a highly addictive product, I know you’ll do anything to get your fix. So I’m going to either give you “free samples” to try. Or worse - I’m going to lace your marijuana with crack cocaine or heroine to hook you. It's time to get rid of the drug dealer, eliminate the core product they sell and get drug dealers away from our children once and for all.

For decades, this has been viewed by policy makers as a “fringe” issue - the red-headed step child of the sixties. It is absolutely irresponsible for society to continue burying our heads in the sand and pretending the current policy works. Too much is at stake to continue pretending this is just a joke from the latest “Reefer Madness” movie. We are in the city that launched the Prohibition Era. The Prohibition Era failed. Let’s learn from history this time, and stop repeating it. This is an issue whose time has come.

It is time we stop turning otherwise law-abiding people into criminals, begin taxing marijuana for commercial sale, and refocus our criminal justice resources toward issues that are truly devastating communities. I look forward to a responsible public debate based on real science, evidence-based practice and common sense. ~

Rep. Diane Russell

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“Heat should not be a luxury item.”