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FEATURED

Marijuana legalization proponents, opponents look to future

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Gregg Brown, left, and Pete Guither share a laugh during an interview Tuesday, June 11, 2019, at Guither's Bloomington residence. While their approaches have been different, both Bloomington men are longtime supporters of marijuana legalization and are pleased with legislative approval of recreational marijuana for adults.

LEWIS MARIEN, THE PANTAGRAPH

BLOOMINGTON — For two longtime, vocal Central Illinois supporters of marijuana legalization, the recent Illinois General Assembly approval of recreational marijuana use by adults is long overdue.

"I'm pleased this is happening," said Pete Guither, 64, of Bloomington, who has been writing and speaking about marijuana legalization since the early 2000s. "Prohibition did not work."

"This is one of the big changes I've seen society make," said Gregg Brown, 70, of Bloomington. He has been a part of the counterculture movement since the late 1960s and has passed out literature and held up signs advocating marijuana legalization for years at events in Bloomington-Normal.

"To see something come out of the darkness and into the light is an incredible thing to watch," Brown said.

But opponents of the legalization, and those who are neutral, remain concerned about the consequences of legalization, even though Gov. J.B. Pritzker said he will sign the legislation.



Gregg Brown holds his "Cannabis cures cancer" sign along Elder Street in Bloomington on Tuesday, June 11, 2019. Brown, a longtime advocate for legalization of marijuana, has passed out literature and held up signs advocating marijuana legalization for years at events in Bloomington-Normal.

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"There will be an increase in youth presenting to emergency departments with acute psychosis related to ingesting marijuana and increased traffic crashes from people using cannabis as an intoxicant," said Dr. Paul Pedersen, president of the Illinois State Medical Society, vice president and chief medical officer of OSF HealthCare St. Joseph Medical Center and an internal medicine physician in Bloomington.

Chelsea Mueller, director of outpatient services for Heritage Behavioral Health Care, which provides substance use and mental health services in Decatur and Clinton, said the agency did not take a position on legalization.

"But, with any kind of substance that is intended to alter your brain, there is risk involved," Mueller said. "It may alter your mood. It may exacerbate a mental health condition you didn't know you had.

"Because it's legal, that doesn't necessarily mean it's safe for everyone to use," Mueller said.

If signed by Pritzker, the legislation would take effect Jan. 1 and would allow Illinoisans age 21 and older to have as much as 30 grams, or about ounce, of flower, 5 grams of cannabis concentrate or 500 milligrams of THC (the chemical that gets users high) in a cannabis-infused product.

Consumption is prohibited in public places, in any motor vehicle and near anyone under 21. Any person, business, landlord, college or university may prohibit use on their properties.

Guither, retired assistant to the dean in the ISU College of Fine Arts, became concerned in the early 2000s about the number of people arrested for marijuana possession and wrote a paper asking why marijuana was illegal. He started a blog, DrugWarRant.com and was faculty adviser to registered student organizations at ISU that called for reform of marijuana laws.

He worked to convince soccer moms ("Drug dealers are making a profit and aren't checking ages. Wouldn't you want this regulated?"); police officers ("When you bust people for drugs, you just created a job opening because

the demand is still there. Wouldn't you rather spend that time on violent criminals?"); and business people ("Your business will not prosper in a community that isn't safe").

Guither concedes that marijuana decreases reaction time but argues that users are aware of their impairment, meaning they are less likely to put themselves and others at risk.

Pedersen responded that people who are impaired may not be aware of the degree of their impairment.

While Pedersen believes there will be an increase in traffic crashes among people using cannabis, Guither said deaths per thousand miles driven are no higher in states where marijuana is legal.

"None of this means that anyone should drive when their impaired, whether they are too tired, texting, drunk, stoned or angry," Guither said.

In states that have legalized marijuana for adults, use by youths has increased, Pedersen said.

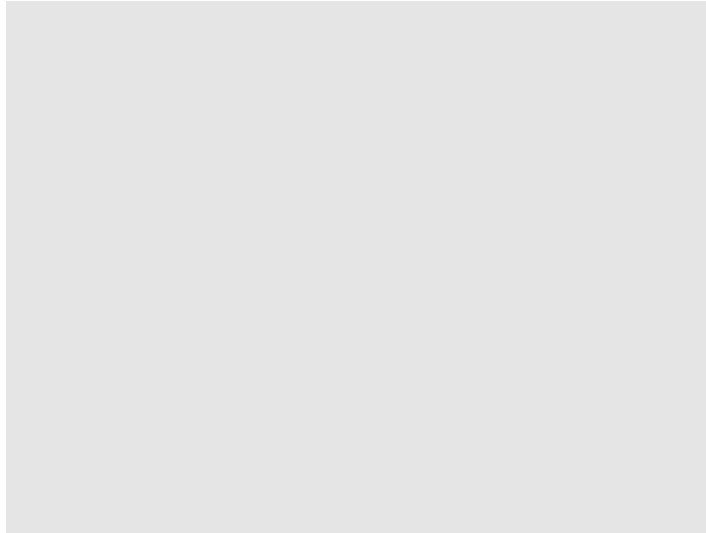
But Guither argued, "as with alcohol, we have an age limit." There are a lot of things for adults that youths aren't allowed to do. "The best thing is to regulate and control because the criminal doesn't care," he said.

"I'd want youth to know that there could be some adverse effects (including impaired coordination and concentration), your judgment could be impaired and you could find yourself in riskier situations," Mueller said. "The risks are greater for individuals under age 25 whose brains are not yet fully developed."

Pedersen said if the societal costs of marijuana legalization outweigh the tax benefits, "we can say there is reason to repeal."

But Joan Hartman, vice president of behavioral health at Bloomington-based Chestnut Health Systems, which include substance abuse treatment, said: "The time for debate about the pros and cons of marijuana legislation is gone. We need to look forward as a treatment provider to help people who will struggle with THC dependence."

While Chestnut's number of clients could increase, Hartman doesn't think it will be significant.



Pete Guither holds a Kiwanis Club paperweight bell during an interview Tuesday, June 11, 2019, at his residence in Bloomington. Guither received the paperweight after speaking about drug legalization to the Golden K Kiwanis Club in Quincy in 2008. "Many members came up to me afterward and said 'I didn't agree with everything, but you gave me food for thought.'"

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"Some people can use it, like alcohol, and are fine," she said. "Others develop issues. We'll continue to see those people and provide quality care for them."

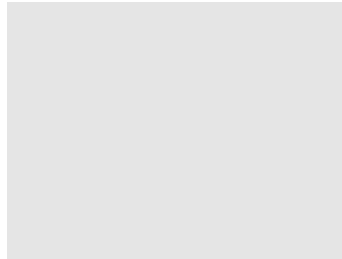
Hartman hopes that limiting the allowable THC concentration, requiring buyers to be at least 21 years old and prohibiting use in public places will be enforced.

"There are going to be people who will have problems with cannabis use," she said. "My hope is that we, as a community, will not put forth judgment and will help them get the help they need."

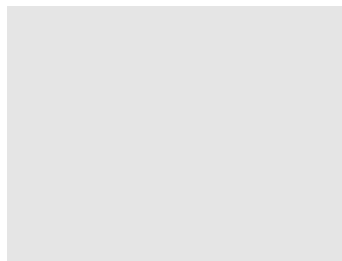
Guither said, "The more responsibly that we can handle this, the sooner this can be more normal."

"Legalization won't make a huge difference to stoners," Guither said. "But now someone who wants to occasionally celebrate with a joint before watching a movie can do so, and I think that's a good thing."

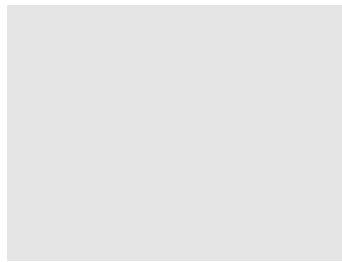
Contact Paul Swiech at (309) 820-3275. Follow him on Twitter: @pg_swiech



Hartman



Pedersen



Mueller

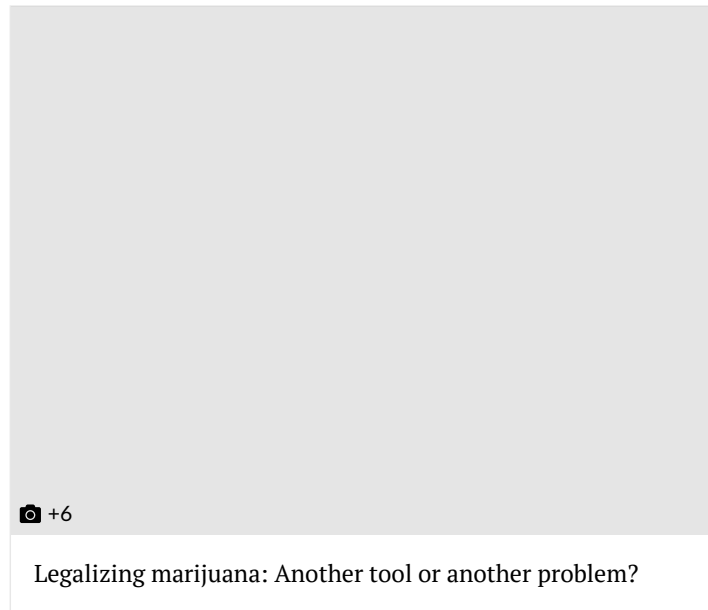
Help is available

Help is available in Central Illinois for people whose drug use is out of control. Among resources are primary care providers; substance abuse treatment centers such as Chestnut Health Systems (309-827-6026) or Heritage Behavioral Health Care (217-362-6262) or another community behavioral health center. For help, call PATH at 211.

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