

Pot club searching for a new home

Medical marijuana dispensary operating without a location

By **HEATHER BOERNER**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The marijuana garden is gone. The phone now rings not in the Santa Cruz Cannabis Pharmaceuticals office but in executive director Rudy Melton's apartment. And the new office the medical marijuana club planned to move into is for lease again.

SANTA CRUZ The medical marijuana dispensary, Melton said, is operating without a location for the foreseeable future. The dispensary had been in a location on Seabright Avenue, but neighbors objected to marijuana being distributed within blocks of a school. A new city ordinance then required the dispensary to be located in an industrial-commercial zone and not within 600 feet of a school.

SCCP found a location that seemed appropriate — the building formerly used by Nub Circus Tea and Chai on Soquel Avenue — and paid the owners \$12,000 for use of the facility. But neighbors complained, saying the building is less than 600 feet away from a charter school operated by Barrios Unidos a half a block away. SCCP could still locate there if the city grants them a special use permit.

"We'll wait till a new group of council members come in and see where to go from there," Melton said. "Until then, we're operating on a delivery-basis only, using cell phones, and are still accepting new patients for certification but it takes much longer now than before."

Santa Cruz Cannabis Pharmaceuticals is one of two medical-marijuana clubs seeking official sanction from the city, which passed a medical marijuana ordinance legalizing the clubs in June.

Melton said SCCP will attempt to negotiate with the new council for the special use permit. Melton called the requirement for such a permit a hole in the medical marijuana ordinance that's caused the organization to all but shut down.

"We've ceased to operate on Seabright Avenue," he said. "There are so many holes in this ordinance, and we knew it when it passed."

Both SCCP and Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana are looking for new locations. They've said, though, that it's been difficult to find properties that conform with the codes because the clubs are non-profit and don't make enough money to pay rents in the current real estate market. They also say that many landlords are hesitant to rent space to medical marijuana dispensaries because of their semi-legal status.

The city increased pressure on SCCP in September, saying the city would sue the club, forcing it to close, if it did begin operating out of the Soquel Avenue location without a special use permit. City Attorney John Barisone said he received permission from the council at a recent closed session to do just that.

Barisone said he never sued SCCP because it



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Santa Cruz Cannabis Pharmaceuticals is still looking for a home since it can't operate in this building on Soquel Avenue.

didn't operate out of the Soquel Avenue office.

No charges and no similar threats have been filed against WAMM because no one complained about them, Barisone said.

All of this leaves patients who rely on SCCP for medical marijuana searching for new clubs or forces them to risk arrest, club backers say. Melton said some of the approximately 1,000 SCCP patients have started going to underground medical marijuana clubs for the drug since SCCP stopped operating its office.

Other patients and founders of the club have shown up at council meetings to ask the coun-

cil to approve the special-use permit that would allow them to operate out of the building, but the council hasn't placed it on the agenda.

"I have multiple sclerosis, and I don't understand why I have to use the little energy I have fighting you here," said SCCP patient Rose Soluso. "You have to understand that most of us don't have the energy or time to come here, and we don't see why we should have to, since this is something we all voted for."

Contact Heather Boerner at hboerner@santa-cruz.com.