

Board dumps pot cultivation task force

Surprise move as supes vow to revisit issue

Drugs

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SANTA CRUZ — In a move that stunned medical marijuana supporters, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday dumped efforts to regulate cannabis grows, abruptly ending efforts to bring order to a situation affecting neighborhoods from summit to sea.

While board members vowed to revisit the issue, the surprising reversal was a blow to the county's vibrant pot industry and their ongoing quest for official sanction, at least at the local level. It was also a sign that the political makeup of the five-member board has shifted.

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"I think we can handle it on a board level and get input from the various interests without having to go through a task force," said Supervisor Bruce McPherson, whose withdrawal of support paved the way for Tuesday's move. "That's a change of heart for me after giving it more thought."

McPherson and other members of the board still want to address cultivation rules, following up recently passed dispensary regulations that were honed further on Tuesday. Those rules were loosened to give San Lorenzo Valley pot shops a chance to relocate, but the cultivation task force seemed set up to give the medical marijuana industry a strong voice in how those rules are written.

Addressing the size, location and even methods of grows supplying the county's more than a dozen dispensa-

ries, those regulations would have made Santa Cruz County one of the few in California to address the issue. The board took up the issue after complaints of whole houses turned into pot operations, and growing concern about environmental damage from outdoor gardens.

Though originally included with the dispensary regulations, medical marijuana providers and growers lobbied successfully to have cultivation placed on a separate track. Supervisor John Leopold first proposed a task force, which would have included three people with ties to the medical marijuana trade, a prominent physician advocate for medical pot, two supervisors, farming representatives and a youth advocate. It did not include environmentalists or neighborhood representatives.

"I'm going to still try to meet with people to get feedback on what would work," Leopold said after the meeting, predicting the board would still address the issue. "We're all still interested in

creating a set of rules."

Supervisor Zach Friend has argued for tough regulations. He said neighborhood and environmental issues were being given "lip service" in the task force effort, which he did not support it.

"No one from the neighborhoods was even put into the commission," Friend said, adding that the regulatory effort was weighted toward those being regulated.

But he, too, favors revisiting the cultivation issue.

"I don't know what form that'll take," Friend said. "Our current structure isn't the solution, it's the problem."

That talk has cultivators and dispensary operators worried. They said the prior rules — which included strict limits on how much square footage, both indoors and out, could be used to grow pot — would have made it difficult to meet the demands of patients.

Attorney Ben Rice, who represents most local pot clubs, said he hoped the

board does not reconsider the rules that originally led to the task force.

"If they're going to come back, we hope they will take another look at this because they didn't spend the necessary time to talk to people and get a good sense of what we need in the county for patients," Rice said, saying new plants, such as those bred to supply medicinal benefits without psychoactive effects, require more space than what the county would have allowed.

The monthslong back-and-forth over pot rules also shows how different the board is than when it first passed an early version of the rules in 2010. While undoubtedly still left-of-center politically, the board's addition of supervisors McPherson and Friend have shifted it toward the center.

"This isn't the same board we had two years ago. That's politics I guess," Rice said.

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