

Medical pot business booms



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Medical marijuana patients at Greenway Compassion Inc. select from several large displays that feature dozens of options, with such names as Northern Lights, Keller Bee, Purple Ape and Ion Worker. The bottom shelf is filled with baked goods.

Santa Cruz dispensaries problem-free, neighbors say

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SANTA CRUZ

Business is brisk at Greenway Compassion Inc. The pot shop has a steady stream of customers and few of the problems some neighbors anticipated before the store opened a year and a half ago.

The medical marijuana dispensary on Dubois Street in the Harvey West neighborhood sees an average of 100 patients and sells up to three pounds of pot each day, said Greenway's general manager, Laura Vanderlinde.

"The plant itself is a saint," said Vanderlinde, who had worked for network television stations in Los Angeles before moving to Santa Cruz for the job. "It has so many healing properties — oils, textiles, etc."

Greenway opened in September 2005 and is one of two medical marijuana shops in the county. The other, Santa Cruz Patients Collective, opened last year on Limekiln Street, a couple of blocks away in Harvey West. The two combined serve an estimated 3,000 medical marijuana patients in the



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LISA MOLYNEUX, GREENWAY OWNER

county, as permitted by the voter-approved Compassionate Use Act.

Though some feared drug activity and crime would increase when the shops opened

their doors, there have been few complaints from neighbors. Police say they've had little problems with either outlet.

"If I didn't know a medical marijuana shop was there, I wouldn't know there was anything different there," said Martha Macambridge of Complete Mailing Service, located near Greenway.

The shopping experience

Shopping at a dispensary is a little like stopping by a bakery to pick out a muffin, but with a lot of security.

All patients are required to show a California ID card and doctor's recommendation to a security guard stationed in the lobby. Dispensary owners say state law prohibits them from asking patients about their medical conditions.

Patients must pass through a metal detector just inside the front door at Santa Cruz Patients Collective, and at Greenway, a security guard waves a metal detector wand over each patient before allowing them to enter.

Inside the "buying room," patients are bombarded with the pungent smell of mar-

Pot clubs

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ijuana and oodles of options.

"Security is key. We pay a lot of attention to the details," Vanderlinde said. "We want the patients to feel comfortable here."

Marijuana in all its various forms, strains and prices — from brownies, cookies and chocolate to joints and buds — are kept behind large glass cases.

At Santa Cruz Patients Collective, which opened in July, a marijuana menu is written on a colorful chalkboard and a sign hangs over the glass case that says "Don't panic, it's organic."

They offer varieties with such names as Cherry Bomb, Richie Rich, Sour Diesel and Plumeria. Prices range from \$15 for a gram of the drug to \$100 for 7 grams.

Sales are rung up on a computer, with a flat screen facing customers to show their bill. Sales tax is charged.

Neither dispensary would say how much money they make, and the city does not provide sales tax revenue for individual businesses.

The marijuana at Greenway — with such names as Mission Possible, Sensi, Panama Mango, Baby Ruth and NYC Diesel — is kept in small glass jars and stored in large glass cases. Individual joints are available at a price of two for \$25.

Patients at Greenway are limited to one visit per day and allowed to buy 3 ounces at a time, owner Lisa Molyneux said.

Similar rules apply to Santa Cruz Patients Collective. Both say they have strict quality standards for the pot.

"We personally test everything that comes in before selling to patients," said Ken Sampson, owner of Santa Cruz Patients Collective and himself a medical marijuana patient. "Everything is grown locally."

A sign near the exit at Greenway reminds patients, "Do not resell your medicine."

Under the law

The dispensaries operate in Santa Cruz under a city ordinance that permits such businesses in industrial areas.

The city Planning Department keeps tabs on the dispensaries and requires a review of the business six months after opening.

Sampson's Santa Cruz Patients Collective sailed through its review in January, and no one from the public spoke for or against it. Greenway passed its review with no major issues, city planning officials said.

Planner Mike Ferry says he's made unannounced visits to both dispensaries to make sure they're complying with conditions of their special-use permits, such as having a security guard on-site and operating within specified hours.

"Every time I've went out there, everything was squared away," Ferry said.

Though the shops are in accordance with local and state laws, they still violate federal law.

Marijuana use became legal for sick people in California in 1996 when voters passed Proposition 215, the Compassionate Use Act.

However, all marijuana use, growth and sales are illegal under federal law, and medical marijuana dispensaries are often the subject of investigations by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

The amount of indoor marijuana seized in California by federal agents shot up 85 percent in 2006 from 2005, DEA special agent Cacy McEnry said.

The increase in busts, she said, is a sign of the federal government's seriousness in cracking down on marijuana use in California.

Peace of mind

Before opening in Santa Cruz, local medical marijuana patients say they had little choice but to drive to Hayward, Oakland and San Francisco to buy the drug at shops designated for such uses.

The two shops in Santa Cruz are among a growing industry statewide. California is home to at least 250 medical marijuana dispensaries — some estimate as many as 400 — serving a ballooning population of sick people who say they need the drug to ease pain, fall asleep and stimulate hunger. There are an estimated 150,000 medical marijuana patients across the state, according to the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.

"I, as a patient, had to take a whole day to drive to another city for safe access to medical mari-

juana," Molyneux said. "The key word is safe access. It's important for patients to have safe access and not have to go to the street."

Alexandra Lee of Santa Cruz, who suffers from a premature aging disease known as Ehlers-Danos syndrome, says she shops for pot at Greenway about once a week.

At 66, her body is more like that of a 96-year-old, Lee said. She's had seven face-lifts and suffered more falls and broken bones than is typical for someone her age.

Without marijuana, Lee says she'd be unable to eat enough food to keep her weight up and sleeping would be more difficult.

"You can actually feel the healing energy," Lee said. "Before this place opened (Greenway), I was going all the way to Hayward."

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ment's seriousness in cracking down on marijuana use in California.

Federal agents say their investigations have revealed widespread abuse of medical marijuana for general use. The DEA did not have specific information about how many dispensaries it has shut down in California or how many it visits because the agency does not differentiate between medical marijuana and illicit pot dealers, McEnry said.

"Millions and millions of dollars are being made. We're finding large amounts of profit at the distribution centers," McEnry said. "For the most part, the people we see are able bodies and young adults, some even athletically fit, who just want to get high," she said.