

Critics call for transparency in Sausalito cannabis ordinance

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Sausalito city officials are drawing ire from critics who say the city isn't being transparent about its interest in cannabis businesses.

Larkspur resident Laurie Dubin said she and a group of health advocates, mothers and educators are concerned the city is dealing with cannabis operators behind closed doors. They said they were shocked to see retail cannabis discussions resurface after the City Council voted to uphold its ban on cannabis businesses last year.

"At this point, we are just hoping that Sausalito will slow the process down," Dubin said. "There has been a complete lack of transparency about what has happened in the past year between the council vote in October 2019 to ban cannabis businesses and September 2020 when the Council suddenly reversed course."

Sausalito officials are getting public pushback over moves to bring retail cannabis to the city. Critics say such businesses would increase youth access to cannabis and potentially lead to substance abuse and death.

City officials have communicated with potential retail operators since February, according to emails obtained through a public records request submitted by Dubin.

Emails show correspondence between the city and cannabis companies, which include a draft proposal and development agreement with Otter Brand and an inquiry from the city asking if the company Fumé was still interested in "pursuing a non-storefront/storefront business in Sausalito."

Cannabis businesses Element7, Fumé, Otter Brands and Sparc have reached out to the city, according to a city staff report.

City leaders said there is nothing unusual about such exchanges, which they say can be used to help inform a future cannabis ordinance.

Councilman Joe Burns, a member of the city's cannabis working group, said the purpose of engaging with dispensary owners is to find out what works best for the city as it considers an ordinance early next year. He said no agreements have been finalized.

“To reach out to people in the industry, or for them to reach out to us, is not a bad thing — it’s actually a requirement of our job,” he said. “So yes, we should be talking to potential businesses.”

Otter Brands CEO Conner Johnston said Sausalito is not the city he has reached out to for feedback, adding that he and his partners have spoken to dozens of community leaders over the last two years.

“Work on this project has been very open and very much in public,” Johnston said. “We’ve spoken publicly at multiple City Council meetings, walked the neighborhood and spoke with merchants. We spoke at the Lions (club), women and Rotary clubs and held events.

“We want to talk to everyone in the community, get feedback, respond to their concerns,” he said. “And throughout the entire process we’ve received unanimous enthusiasm and support from people who actually live and work in Sausalito.”

Councilwoman Jill Hoffman also aired concern with the process, saying she too thought an operator would be selected before passing an ordinance.

Councilwoman Joan Cox, who also serves the city in the working group, said the information gathered from discussions with cannabis operators would help craft an ordinance that will be publicly vetted.

At Hoffman’s request, the council agreed that the opinions of health experts be included in the next staff report and discussion.

“We cannot ignore that. We just can’t,” Hoffman said. “Sometimes you have competing experts, but at least you’re addressing the issue.”