

Marin Voice: Cannabis not a solution for economic crisis caused by COVID-19

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SAN RAFAEL, CA – MARCH 21: Sin Mint Cookies – a strain of cannabis – are packed for delivery at cannabis delivery service Nice Guys Delivery in San Rafael, Calif. on Saturday, March 21, 2020. Nice Guy chief operating officer and part owner Monica Gray says the Sin Mint Cookie product is very popular. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)

By Don Carney and Kelsey Fernandez |

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We are writing on behalf of Marin Prevention Network – a countywide group of organizations and individuals who work to prevent the harmful effects of underage substance use.

We wish to share some information and views about our local municipalities seeking to cover budget shortfalls by permitting new cannabis businesses to operate, in search of tax revenues.

We share everyone's concerns about the economic suffering of residents, businesses, nonprofits and local governments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we strongly believe the sale and taxation of non-medical cannabis in our communities will not solve our governments' budget problems.

Community health is the most important determinant of economic health of communities, including Marin. Research shows that when governments collect tax revenues from harmful products, the result is often high fiscal and social costs, leading to net losses in both government budgets and community health.

For the past five decades, protecting community health has been a guiding principle of governance in Marin. For this reason, local governments throughout Marin have not permitted industries that pollute our environment, despite the opportunity to collect tax revenue.

The 2016 Voter's Guide explained that Proposition 64 would decriminalize marijuana possession and "allow local governments to ban non-medical marijuana businesses." These were important provisions for many Californians who voted to change the law.

Now, four years later, the cannabis industry is selling high-potency vaporized cannabis concentrates with THC, the compound that gives pot its high, at 20-90%, "flower" products with 20-30% THC (compared to 3-5% THC in the 1970s) and candy-flavored edibles that are popular with teens.

A substantial body of research shows that when youth and young adults use cannabis frequently or heavily for "recreational" purposes, they can experience adverse effects: altered brain development, impaired decision-making, poor academic performance, diminished life satisfaction, cannabis dependence and addiction.

The corporate cannabis industry is going after young people with the same tactics the tobacco/vaping industry has used to sell nicotine. New evidence shows the availability of recreational cannabis is associated with increased youth vaping of cannabis concentrates. Allowing cannabis businesses to operate storefronts creates opportunities for the industry to further penetrate into our communities and make their products more visible to our youth. Research shows that youth access to substances is strongly correlated with youth use. If there is a store selling alcohol, cigarettes and vapes, teens can gain access through older friends, using fake IDs and "shoulder tapping." Environment matters.

Surveys show that among youth in Marin, there are two parallel epidemics: vaping nicotine and vaping cannabis. During the past two years, local officials throughout Marin responded

by voting to ban the sale of flavored tobacco vaping products. They also voted against non-medical cannabis retail storefronts. They made their decisions after studying the scientific evidence, hearing the widespread concerns expressed by teens and parents, as well as considering the view that elected leaders have an ethical responsibility to not seek revenue from the sale of products that can harm and addict youth.

Especially now with COVID-19, our local governments should not be tacitly joining forces with industries whose products can addict young people, exploit minorities or cause environmental damage. California's burgeoning cannabis industry is engaged in doing all of these things.

We rely on our elected representatives to send health-promoting messages through policies. This is the worst possible time to be promoting "recreational" smoking and vaping of any products. Research shows that smoking doubles the risk of otherwise healthy people developing coronavirus infections, and doubles the risk of getting sicker from COVID-19 because inhaling smoke impairs lung function. A new study shows that among teens and young adults, vaping is associated with a substantially increased risk of developing COVID-19.

Our local governments exist to protect the health and welfare of all of our community members, including youth. Therefore, our local governments should not seek to gain revenue at the expense of our youth and young adults.

The large majority of elected officials throughout Marin have weighed the evidence, listened to community members and deliberately decided to protect young people. COVID-19 has only made the wisdom of their decisions clearer.

Don Carney, of Fairfax, and Kelsey Fernandez, of San Anselmo, are members of Marin Prevention Network's Steering Committee.