

# PBN

## Get ready for marijuana debate

By

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The Ocean State appears poised to join the national debate over legalizing recreational marijuana use, with a bill in the General Assembly and talk by state leaders of a possible nonbinding referendum on the question.

Legalization has been an economic boon in Colorado, and supporters say it would generate much-needed revenue here too.

But could there be hidden costs for local businesses?

While many local business leaders are still weighing the potential impacts, the Rhode Island Manufacturers Association says it will oppose the proposed legislation to legalize, regulate and tax recreational marijuana.

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“Rhode Island has a lot of smaller companies and if [the state is] going to legalize it, part of the challenge is how easy or difficult it may be to see if an employee coming back from lunch is under the influence,” said Bill McCourt, executive director of RIMA. “It’s a real workplace-safety issue.”

The bill sponsored by Rep. Scott Slater, D-Providence, and in the Senate by Sen. Joshua Miller, D-Cranston, would not require employers to “accommodate the use or possession of marijuana, or being under the influence of marijuana, in a place of employment.”

RIMA, however, believes marijuana should not be legalized locally until the federal government decides it’s legal, particularly because of companies such as General Dynamics Electric Boat that perform work under government contract.

But companies dealing with federal contracts may just continue to follow federal law.

“General Dynamics Electric Boat follows federal guidelines in its hiring practices and security-clearance requests, and anticipates no changes in current policies,” said spokesman Tim Boulay. Electric Boat employs about 3,600 at Quonset Point.

The Central Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce might support putting the question to voters, said Chamber President and CEO Lauren E.I. Slocum.

“As with similar issues in the past, [board members] are strong proponents of having all the information available, so voters could make an educated decision,” she said.

House Speaker Nicholas A. Mattiello is considering a nonbinding referendum on the subject. But the bill already in the legislature first must be heard, he said in an email.

The unfolding local debate comes as Massachusetts lawmakers are expected to consider putting the question of legalization to voters on Nov. 8. Gov. Charlie Baker has said he would oppose legalization.

If Massachusetts legalizes first, it would benefit from businesses serving both states, says Angela K. Dills, an associate professor of economics at Providence College.

“Not only would we see Rhode Island consumers gaining access to it [in Massachusetts], we wouldn’t get the benefit of economic growth of businesses being started in Rhode Island,” she said. •