

Group asks board for input on marijuana dispensary in Dover

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DOVER - At its meeting on Tuesday night, the Dover Selectboard heard from two Wilmington residents, Stephanie Zumbruski, who goes by Stephanie Parly, and Kathleen Matos, who would like to submit an application to the state to establish a medical marijuana dispensary in Dover.

Zumbruski and Matos said they wanted to have an initial conversation with the board to take the board's temperature about whether or not it would be amenable before they pursue their application. "Municipalities have the ability through local ordinances and townships to put a block on it," said Matos. "We wanted to come to the board and see what the feelings were initially to make sure we're in compliance with any zoning ordinances."

Zumbruski noted that a planned medical marijuana dispensary in Bennington is reportedly threatened because the town is blocking it. "He jumped before he looked," she said of the person who intended to open the dispensary. "And we don't want to do that."

Vermont currently has four active medical marijuana dispensaries. The nearest to the Deerfield Valley is in Brattleboro. According to the state's website dedicated to the matter, a fifth dispensary is expected to open in March 2018, and an application period for a sixth dispensary will open when the number of regis-

tered users in the state reaches 7,000. According to the site, as of December 18th, 2017, there were 5,313 medical marijuana users registered with the state.

Matos said she expects that application period to open in summer 2018, and she and Zumbruski would like to apply to establish a site in Windham County, and specifically, in Dover. They told the board that, according to their research, Windham County is second in the state for registered medical marijuana users, with Newfane and Wilmington holding the top populations within the county for registered users.

"Each dispensary can only have so many patients," said Zumbruski. "If we have 735 (registered users) in Windham County, that means only a certain number can go to Brattleboro. After that, they're traveling up north or to Massachusetts. It is something that the area needs, especially if the one in Bennington is not opening."

Vice chair Vicki Capitani asked why Matos and Zumbruski looked at Dover and not other Windham County towns. "In the application process, part of the biggest points are location security," said Zumbruski. "The Dover Police Department is better rated than the Wilmington Police Department. And so is the fire department. That's not to say we won't look in other towns, but the properties that I've found in Dover are better than the properties I've found in Wilmington for security purposes."

Police chief Randy Johnson read a list of concerns that he said he prepared with Cindy Hayford from Deerfield Valley Community Partnership, who was not present. The list included Johnson and Hayford's feeling that the need for separate dispensaries for marijuana "magnifies the fact that it is not mainstream or uniformly accepted"; that regardless of state laws, the federal government continues to classify marijuana as an illegal drug; that because the feds regulate banks, marijuana is a cash business, which could lead to an uptick in crime; that a dispensary may not fit with Dover's "family-friendly" image; and that substance abuse prevention for youth is a big issue in the Deerfield Valley, and housing a dispensary could send the wrong message.

Johnson said he came to the board a couple of years ago when he had an inkling that legalization was on the horizon. He said at the time, he suggested that an ordinance be established in the town with regard to marijuana. "At that point," said Johnson, "the board said they didn't want to make a decision on whether or not to have an ordinance and that it should come from the town's voters."

Board member Dan Baliotti asked how the dispensary would determine whether someone needs medical marijuana. "Who prescribes that someone needs it?" asked Baliotti.

"Your doctor prescribes it, and then you have to register with the state, and then you have to be licensed to go to only one dispensary," said Matos. "You have to have an appointment and a registration card from the state to come into the dispensary. There are so many rules and guidelines. It's not a free-for-all."

Economic development director Steve Neratko, who relocated to the area in the summer of 2017, said he has personal experience with the positive effects of medical marijuana. Neratko said his wife, who has encephalitis and epilepsy, was having eight seizures per day for several years.

"We were going to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, one of the top neurology clinics in the country, and what they recommended to us was to move to a state that had medical marijuana," said Neratko. "That was one of the things that brought us to Vermont. We needed access to that. She has not had a seizure in many months now. It's been quite remarkable. So in terms of the medical aspect of it, I think there is definitely use for it, and I don't think that this would be the bad neighbor that people think it would be."

"Everybody needs to keep in mind that if we were here asking to open a pharmacy, it wouldn't be a big deal," said Zumbruski. "That's what we're asking to do legally in the state of Vermont, is open a pharmacy for people who need this drug, just like people need their Prozac."

In reference to the comparison to Prozac, chair Josh Cohen said that there is a difference of science and federal legality, but that he felt the matter was "big-

ger than the board" and that it would need to be brought to the voters in a special town meeting. Overall, save for asking questions, individual board members, including Cohen, did not express one way or the other whether they personally would support the endeavor.

Capitani suggested that Matos and Zumbruski coordinate and host several public informational meetings in the town to educate the public about what they are seeking to do and what the benefits of the site could be. "And I think it would behoove the town to bring some counterpoints, too," said Capitani.

Matos and Zumbruski said they would work to coordinate public meetings on the matter.