

Taking the Case for Cannabis Legalization Directly to the People

By: Senate Democratic Leader Melissa Agard (D-Madison)

In 2013, shortly after I was elected to the state legislature, I began researching cannabis policy. At that time, only a handful of states had legalized medical cannabis and Washington and Colorado stood alone as the only states to legalize cannabis for recreational purposes. The idea of introducing a bill to fully legalize cannabis in Wisconsin was uncharted territory.

Despite facing the headwinds of a gerrymandered Republican majority, I took the plunge and introduced the bill in February 2014 because it was clear to me that the most dangerous thing about cannabis in Wisconsin is that it is illegal. I knew this was a conversation that we needed to have as a state and I haven't looked back, introducing the legislation every session since. The reaction from the people of our state has been nothing short of extraordinary.

It is not an exaggeration to say that my office has been contacted by thousands of individuals about this policy. These folks are not defined by party affiliation or geography, nor do they have the same demographics in age, race, or gender. It is a broad coalition of support like few I have seen during my time in the legislature. This has been reinforced with polling and non-binding referendum questions showing a strong majority of Wisconsinites, including a majority of Republicans, support responsible adult legalization.

Despite this, Republicans in the Capitol continue to promote their outdated and dangerous policy of prohibition. They share the same debunked arguments seen in "Reefer Madness" almost a hundred years ago and ignore the benefits legalization would have in Wisconsin. If these elected officials are not going to represent the will of the voters who sent them to Madison, then it's time for us to bring the message of legalization, directly to the people of Wisconsin.

That's why I am embarking on the ["Grass Routes" Tour](#) throughout Wisconsin. I'll be visiting communities in every corner of the state to discuss the current landscape of cannabis policy in Wisconsin and what the future could hold. These events will include a presentation and a Q&A with the folks in attendance. If the majority party in the Assembly and Senate won't listen to the people, I sure as hell will.

Here in Wisconsin, we are increasingly an island of prohibition. Every day that we wait is one more day that we are less safe, less prosperous, and less equitable. As it stands today, 21 states have legalized recreational marijuana and 38 states have legalized marijuana for medicinal purposes. A recent report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum shows that 50 percent of all Wisconsinites above the age of 21 now live within a 75-minute drive to a recreational marijuana dispensary in another state and these dispensaries are reaping the revenue benefits from the sale of THC products to Wisconsinites. Prohibition has failed, is failing, and will continue to fail until we take action to legalize cannabis in Wisconsin.

The Biden Administration is taking action as well, accepting applications for pardons from individuals convicted of or charged with simple possession in federal or District of Columbia courts and reviewing marijuana's classification as a Schedule 1 drug under the Controlled Substances Act. There is positive, progressive momentum at every level of government.

Simply put, it's not a matter of "if" marijuana will be legalized in Wisconsin but "when." It's time we do this in a manner that honors Wisconsin businesses, rights the past wrongs in our criminal justice system, and brings revenue back into our state that is currently flooding across our borders to neighboring states.

I believe if we have authentic, substantive conversations across the state, we can grow this movement and help ensure elected officials hear from, and listen to, the people they represent. It's high time we get this done, Wisconsin. Are you ready?