

Green Means Go: 5 Things That Must Happen Before Massachusetts Recreational Weed Sales Begin

Nearly a year ago, Massachusetts voters chose to make recreational cannabis legal statewide. In December of 2016, Governor Charlie Baker signed legislation that extended the start date of recreational weed sales to July of 2018. And just over a month ago, the Cannabis Control Commission was appointed by Governor Baker, Attorney General Maura Healey and state treasurer Deb Goldberg. The board consists of four opponents of cannabis legalization (Steven Hoffman, Jennifer Flanagan, Britte McBride, and Kay Doyle) and one proponent (Shaleen Title).

In a discussion with Tom Angell of Forbes on the duties of the commission, Shaleen Title said, "This entails setting up regulations for the new industry and a licensing process for cultivation, manufacturing, retail and testing, as well as policy development around things like edibles, packaging and advertising. Our deadline under the law is to begin accepting applications by April 1, 2018." (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomangell/2017/09/18/exclusive-meet-massachusetts-pro-legalization-marijuana-regulator/#17efeb3c2750>)

While some may argue that recreational cannabis sales should have started this past summer, some could also argue that the extra year of preparation will give people in Massachusetts adequate time to maximize their roles in the market from day one. When it comes to cannabis, the state of Massachusetts is at a yellow light. And no matter how often we see someone speed up to make it onto Route 18 thirty seconds faster,

yellow means yield and green means go. And so, now is the time for Massachusetts to yield to cannabis; to check mirrors, use signals, and survey the roads. Because come July 2018, green means go.

#1- The Cannabis Control Commission must establish and share regulations by March 15,2018

One of the first and most important steps in the logistical process of establishing recreational cannabis in Massachusetts is implementing law and order. This is the overall mission of the newly appointed Cannabis Control Commission, who are working with the cannabis advisory board and the Commonwealth to build the skeleton of the industry. Areas of discussion within the board will involve policies pertaining to cannabis edibles, packaging, advertising, and licensing of cultivation, retail, testing, and manufacturing facilities.

While it is important for the Cannabis Control Commission to ensure that eventual business owners are able to conduct effective business, it is of vital importance to ensure regulations place the safety and well-being of consumers as a priority. The deadline for the commission to establish these regulations is March 15th, 2018.

#2- The Cannabis Control Commission must make license applications available by April 1,2018

Shortly after posting regulations in March 2018, the Cannabis Control Commission will be required to make licensing applications available. This will give the commission and investors about three months time to oversee application approvals and begin setting up shops. Citizens will be required to pay a \$3,000 initial application fee in addition to a fee corresponding to the license desired. Retail, manufacturing, and cultivation licenses will cost \$15,000, and testing licenses will cost \$10,000. Initial investment costs could cost upwards of \$20,000 per license. (<http://www.mass.gov/treasury/marijuana/frequently-asked-quest>

ions.html)

#3- More towns must allow recreational cannabis sales

Over the past year, several Massachusetts municipalities have fought hard to keep recreational cannabis businesses from popping up. This past September, Milford Massachusetts voted to ban recreational weed shops, even though 52% of voters agreed to legalize recreational weed in 2016. (<http://www.wbur.org/news/2017/09/20/milford-voters-ban-marijuana-stores>)

This news also came despite Massachusetts cannabis company Sage Naturals having an agricultural facility in the city at the time of the vote. While this is an issue that other states have faced during recreational legalization, the reality for those of us in Massachusetts is that fewer shops means a smaller market. There are about a dozen cannabis shops in Massachusetts currently; many people have to make specific arrangements to even make it to a medical cannabis facility.

Leafly.com contributor Andrew Livingston summed up the importance of access points well, stating “Too few dispensaries and a market simply stagnates. In Massachusetts, despite an inclusive set of qualifying conditions and an embrace of other factors needed to be successful (such as smoke-able flower), the medical market has had trouble attracting patients because there are currently only a dozen dispensaries. That’s about one dispensary per 560,000 state residents. And until recently, none offered delivery services to more remote regions of the state.”

If people in Massachusetts do not have efficient access to recreational weed shops, then they will likely stick to buying weed on the streets. This will hinder the legal market’s ability to grow, while contributing to the growth of the illegal weed market.

#4-Fair prices and taxes must be established

This one sort of piggy-backs off of my last point. There must be an accurate barometer for street weed prices in Massachusetts, and this information must be taken into account when the Cannabis Control Commission establishes regulations in March. Business owners must have the financial ability and legislative flexibility to offer product at fair market prices, while still allowing for meaningful tax dollars to be accumulated. The alternative is money hungry businesses driving consumers back into the hands of the illegal market that has controlled cannabis in the state for decades.

Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker proposed a 20% sales tax on recreational cannabis in July of 2017. This rate would be among the lowest in the United States, as Oregon pays a 20% sales tax, Colorado pays 27.9%, and Washington pays 37%.

While a lower sales tax could bring in more consumers from out of state, could the price of cannabis in Massachusetts increase as a result? Would companies charge more purely because people would be willing to pay more given the fact that they aren't paying an extra 15-20% worth of taxes in another state? Because if so, it will contribute to a growing illegal market.

I believe the majority of cannabis consumers would pay comparable prices and taxes for cannabis (if not slightly higher) if it meant their tax dollars were being used effectively throughout their communities. But if it becomes evident that the legal recreational businesses are raising prices purely for personal profit, and the state government is using more dollars than necessary to keep the program running, these consumers will continue seeing Mr. WeedMan420 down the street instead. Additionally, cannabis growers must have adequate incentive to produce product for the legal recreational market. If not, growers will sell their product elsewhere and business owners will have to pay more to outsource their cultivation. Essentially, we need a smooth

relationship between consumers, growers, and business owners; and this means setting a fair price for all sides.

#5- Cannabis education must be widespread

Lastly, cannabis education must be widespread. A smart market may be considered dangerous to the dastardly few, but it is arguably the most important part of the equation. The dollars made because of a recreational cannabis market in Massachusetts will mean very little if people are putting the health and well-being of the commonwealth at risk in the process. We still lack education on the effect of cannabis on driving, as well as an accurate way of determining this roadside. A majority of people are unfamiliar with how cannabis edibles can negatively impact their bodies depending on dosage and accompanying activities.

Cannabis concentrates are still very much taboo, and most people have no idea what “cannabidiol” even is. The average non-consumer likely is ignorant to the fact that every human being has an endocannabinoid system, and that receptors in our brains are designed to react to ingested THC. And aside from independent research on the internet, there is a lack of widespread media coverage on cannabis education. There are benefits to the consumption of cannabis that many people are continually overlooking, and instead associating weed with the lazy pothead stereotype.

We live in a country where many people suffer from chronic pain, eating disorders, CTE, prescription drug addictions, heroin addictions, alcoholism; all of which cannabis can provide safer relief for. So in order for recreational cannabis to truly take off in Massachusetts, there must be a heightened inclination to be educated on cannabis as a whole. There must be a heightened inclination on our parts to figure out what our specific medical and recreational needs are and how cannabis can contribute to these needs. And with this knowledge, consume safely. Only then will people begin to take

full advantage of weed in this state.

Prior to any recreational weed business opening in Massachusetts, the market must understand cannabis, its impact, and obstacles it creates more clearly. Over the next 6-9 months, while legislation is written and business plans developed, Massachusetts must also collectively address how cannabis will be marketed to consumers and advertised.

While alcohol commercials are a dime a dozen, cannabis themed billboards are about as rare as Big Foot. Cannabis YouTubers are being removed by the company for being non-advertiser friendly, and television networks would rather not shed light on cannabis. Many people view cannabis in a negative light still, and Massachusetts must focus on removing this stigma and replacing it with informed insight. We must ensure that this stigma does not cause the establishment of policies that prohibits the cannabis industry's ability to flourish in Massachusetts.

The time to educate ourselves and each other on cannabis is now. We must yield to cannabis.

Because come July 2018, green means go.

-New Bedford Guide