

VS cannabis debate draws questions, has some answers

By Plez Hill / The Valley Springs News / August 24, 2016

A debate on whether the future commercial growth of cannabis should be outlawed or regulated in Calaveras County was held Thursday evening at the Veterans Memorial Hall in Valley Springs.

Commercial growth of cannabis is currently legal under a county ordinance to regulate its cultivation and commerce. The ordinance was passed by the county's Board of Supervisors on May 10 and will stay in effect until the board adopts a permanent ordinance believed to be months away.

The debate, sponsored by the Valley Springs Area Business Association, drew some 80 attendees and lasted nearly two hours. Those participating in the debate were Bill McManus, Merita Callaway and Caslin Tomaszewski. Don Urbanus served as moderator.

McManus, a proponent of a total ban on the commercial growth of cannabis in the county, told the audience legalization of commercial growth would increase the county's criminal element – something, he said, many residents moved to Calaveras County to escape.

Former county Supervisor Callaway said she came to the debate as a proponent of Cannabis Control Initiative Measure D and "I don't have any skin in this game." The measure, she said, establishes regulations and enforcement pertaining to the location and permitting of cannabis cultivation by addressing issues such as land use, water, security and the environment. If passed, it would supersede any future action by the board adopting a permanent ordinance.

Callaway said the county already has an underground cannabis commercial growth economy and Measure D would regulate something that already exists. She said the vast majority of regulations delineated in Measure D are based on those in the urgency ordinance. McManus countered stating Measure D reduces fees commercial growers currently pay.

Tomaszewski, executive director of Calaveras Cannabis Alliance, joined McManus and Callaway on stage for the debate. Many members of the audience questioned why he was there since they believed this was to have been a debate between McManus and Callaway. Urbanus said Tomaszewski was invited to participate in the debate by the VSABA.

Tomaszewski highlighted efforts by members of his association to comply with all regulations and to contribute to the county's economy.

Due to no questions being directed to Tomaszewski after his opening statement at the start of the event, and perhaps due to unwelcomed comments made to him by some members in the audience, he left the stage during the latter half of the debate.

During the debate, members of the audience expressed several concerns; they included being worried the legalization of commercial growth of cannabis would lead to gangs coming into and establishing themselves in the county. This they said would result in unsafe living conditions and decreasing property values. Concerns also arose about the county's current urgency ordinance not adequately addressing drainage problems caused by a commercial grower located on a hillside adjacent to their property. The grower's fencing, it was said, was also inadequate along the hillside since it did not hide the growth, plus night-time lighting there made the area look like a football stadium.

McManus answered a question addressed to him by someone who was worried about loss of employment if a ban on commercial growth occurred. McManus responded by saying he hoped the person would seek having a better job than trimming marijuana.

Based on the amount and intensity of applause made throughout the debate, it appeared the majority of those in attendance were in favor of McManus' view to totally ban commercial growth of cannabis in the county.

In attendance witnessing the debate were Sheriff DeBasilio and District 5 Supervisor Steve Kearney.