

Commercial cannabis program moves forward without a budget

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Implementation of Calaveras County's new commercial cannabis cultivation ordinance and the cannabis background clearance badge ordinance will go forward without a budget in place.

The County Board of Supervisors last week once again was unable to muster a four-fifth's vote to approve the budgetary items.

Last week's action was identical to a Nov. 19 vote of the board with Supervisors Merita Callaway, Jack Garamendi and Benjamin Stopper in favor of approving budgets to implement the programs, while Supervisors Dennis Mills and Gary Tofanelli were opposed.

The matter was brought back to the board on Tofanelli's request. Tofanelli suggested he and Mills meet with County Administrator Officer Al Alt in the meantime to address their concerns.

Tofanelli reported he and Mills met once with Alt and then Tofanelli met alone with Alt and nearly nothing in the original budget proposal had been amended to their suggestions.

Alt agreed he brought back mostly the same proposal as originally considered by the board and that was due to time constraints to have the item on the Dec. 10 agenda.

Last week's budget vote does not kill or slow down implementation of the commercial cannabis program.

The cultivation and background clearance ordinances became effective Nov. 22 and fees associated with those programs go in effect Dec.23. County staff estimates nearly \$2.4 million in income and expenses in the first year of the cannabis program.

"If the budget is not approved, administrative and regulatory functions will be fulfilled by existing staff and equipment funded by the General Fund rather than by fee revenue from cultivation permits and clearance badges," according to the staff report to the board.

"Current staffing in General Fund and fee-supported departments will be required to perform the work associated with the regulatory program and existing job duties for other programs," the staff report added. "Performing existing duties with the addition of the extensive volume of work from cannabis regulatory program will inhibit work in all existing programs as well as the new regulatory program."

Those who spoke in public pointed fingers at both sides of the issue causing the dilemma.

Longtime commercial cannabis proponent Bill McManus said the proposed budget would be a drain on the General Fund because the costs associated with running the program were woefully underestimated and “will not balance out.”

Another commercial cannabis proponent Vicky Reinke said the impasse was the fault of the majority of the supervisors for passing the ordinances without budgets in the first place.

“You’re responsible (Callaway, Garamendi and Stopper). Don’t blame Gary and Dennis.”

“Put aside your personal agenda,” District 1 resident and supervisor candidate Sharon Romano told Mills and Tofanelli. The ordinances are the law, she said, and Mills and Tofanelli were putting a tremendous burden on county staff and destroying their morale.

“Supervisor Mills, Supervisor Tofanelli, you are hurting everyone in the county and obstructing the will of the majority of this board to carry out the law of this county,” Board Chairman Garamendi said prior to the vote.

“This cannot be a ‘my show or no go’ situation,” Mills said earlier in the meeting explaining his stand.

Tofanelli said his reservations were never addressed, which included not enough being charged for renewal fees to sustain the new positions associated with the cannabis program.

Fees for the program are \$12,561.78 for permits and \$2,606.75 for renewals.