

Houlton Introduces Updated Cannabis Regulations

New Houlton Ordinance May Preserve Local Medical Cannabis Caregiver Facilities

On Monday night, the Houlton Town Council introduced a new ordinance designed to protect the operation of existing state-licensed medical marijuana caregiver retail stores. This move comes despite the town's ban on all other retail marijuana establishments. The ordinance, if passed, would allow medical marijuana facilities that were in place before July 25, 2024, to continue serving patients, ensuring these vital services remain available to the community.

Town's History with Marijuana Legislation

Maine legalized recreational marijuana in 2016, but Houlton residents voted against allowing recreational marijuana sales within the town the following year. Since then, the town has maintained a firm stance against retail marijuana establishments, including testing facilities, cultivation facilities, and social clubs. The proposed ordinance introduces an important exception for medical marijuana caregiver retail stores, which have been integral to patient care in the area.

Challenges from State Policy Changes

The ordinance was prompted by recent changes from the state Office of Cannabis Policy, which introduced new requirements for medical marijuana caregivers. Under the updated rules, caregivers must obtain authorization from the town to continue serving patients at their retail stores or dispensary offices. Zach Waite, owner of Lifted Medical Marijuana in Houlton, brought this issue to the town council's attention earlier this month, expressing concerns about how the changes could severely impact patient care.

Council's Debate and Public Reaction

During the town council meeting, there was significant debate about the ordinance. Councilor Eileen McLaughlin voiced concerns that the new language might contradict the town's previous vote against retail stores. However, Houlton Town Manager Jeremy Smith clarified that the town attorney had prepared the ordinance to ensure compliance with state laws, emphasizing that the ordinance was necessary to align with the new state regulations.

The public comment session revealed a divide in community opinion. Several residents spoke in favor of the ordinance, highlighting the importance of medical marijuana facilities for patient care. Steven Cole, a local supporter, argued for the need to use correct terminology and combat misinformation, stressing that the town's previous vote against marijuana retail establishments in 2018 may have been misunderstood by many.

Voices from the Community

Cole's remarks were supported by another resident who moved to Houlton specifically for its medical marijuana program, underscoring the importance of these facilities for patients who rely on them for treatment. On the other hand, some residents expressed their opposition, citing personal concerns about the presence of marijuana in the community. One resident described her discomfort with visiting the home of a regular marijuana user, while Councilor McLaughlin reiterated her concern about the ease of obtaining a medical marijuana card.

Next Steps in the Ordinance Process

Council Chairman Chris Robinson outlined the next steps for the ordinance, explaining that the first reading will take place on September 9 during the town council meeting. A public hearing is scheduled for September 23, with the council planning to accommodate the anticipated large turnout by holding the hearing in a larger venue. Robinson emphasized the importance of public participation in the process, assuring residents that everyone will have the opportunity to voice their opinions.

The introduction of this ordinance marks a significant moment for Houlton's medical marijuana caregivers and their patients. As the town navigates the complexities of state and local regulations, the outcome of this ordinance will have a lasting impact on how medical marijuana is accessed and managed in the community. The upcoming public hearing will be a critical forum for residents to express their views and influence the future of medical marijuana facilities in Houlton.

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