

Ohio Activists Plan Referendum to Block Cannabis Rollback Law

Ohio Activists Launch Referendum Effort to Block Rollback of Voter Approved Marijuana Law and Hemp Restrictions

Ohio cannabis reform advocates are mobilizing to halt a newly enacted state law they say undermines the will of voters and threatens thousands of small businesses, launching a referendum campaign aimed at suspending the measure until Ohioans can weigh in at the ballot box.

Ohioans for Cannabis Choice announced Friday that it is beginning the signature-gathering process to challenge Senate Bill 56, legislation recently signed by Gov. Mike DeWine (R) that rolls back portions of the state's voter-approved marijuana legalization law and sharply restricts the sale of consumable hemp products.

If successful, the referendum would pause implementation of the law and send it to voters at the next regular or general election.

Referendum Would Temporarily Halt Implementation of SB 56 Pending a Public Vote

Under Ohio law, referendum campaigns must first collect 1,000 valid signatures to trigger review by the secretary of state's office. Once certified, organizers must gather roughly 250,000 valid signatures statewide to qualify the measure for the ballot.

If activists meet that threshold within the three-month deadline—coinciding with the date SB 56 is set to take effect, the law would be suspended until voters have a chance to approve or reject it.

“We are launching a referendum campaign to go directly to the voters,” said Dennis Willard, spokesperson for Ohioans for Cannabis Choice. “We believe voters will say no to government overreach, no to closing 6,000 small businesses and pink-slipping thousands of workers across the state, and no to once again recriminalizing hemp and marijuana.”

New Law Scales Back Marijuana Rights Approved by Voters in 2023

Voters approved Ohio's adult-use marijuana initiative in 2023, legalizing possession, home cultivation and regulated retail sales. But SB 56 would roll back several provisions of that law, including recriminalizing certain marijuana-related activities that had been explicitly legalized.

Among the most controversial changes, the law would make it illegal to possess marijuana obtained from any source other than an Ohio-licensed dispensary or a legal homegrow. That means Ohio residents could face criminal charges for carrying cannabis legally purchased in neighboring states such as Michigan.

Advocates argue the change reintroduces legal risk for consumers and contradicts the spirit of the voter-approved initiative.

Anti-Discrimination Protections for Cannabis Consumers Eliminated

Critics also point to provisions that remove statutory protections designed to prevent discrimination against people who lawfully use cannabis.

Under the original voter-approved law, individuals were shielded from adverse actions related to child custody determinations, eligibility for organ transplants and certain professional licensing decisions based solely on lawful cannabis use. SB 56 strips those protections from state law.

Advocates say the changes could have far-reaching consequences for medical and adult-use cannabis consumers alike.

Restrictions on Where and How Cannabis Can Be Consumed Tightened

The new law would also impose new limits on where cannabis can be consumed, including banning smoking marijuana in outdoor public locations such as bar patios. It further allows landlords to prohibit vaping marijuana at rental properties.

Violations of landlord-imposed vaping bans—even if they occur outdoors on a rented property, such as in a backyard—could be treated as misdemeanor offenses under the law.

Opponents argue these provisions go beyond reasonable regulation and effectively criminalize conduct that voters explicitly chose to legalize.

Hemp Industry Faces Broad Prohibition Outside Licensed Dispensaries

In addition to marijuana rollbacks, SB 56 imposes sweeping restrictions on consumable hemp products, effectively banning their sale outside of licensed marijuana dispensaries.

Under the law, hemp-derived products containing more than 0.4 milligrams of total THC per container—or those made with synthetic cannabinoids—can no longer be sold in convenience stores, smoke shops or other non-dispensary settings.

Advocates warn the move would decimate Ohio's hemp industry, noting that most consumers visiting licensed dispensaries are likely to opt for marijuana products rather than hemp-based alternatives.

State Hemp Restrictions Move Faster Than Federal Timeline

The Ohio legislation aligns with a recently enacted federal law included in an appropriations package signed by President Donald Trump that recriminalizes most consumable hemp products. However, the federal ban includes a one-year implementation window.

Ohio's law would take effect sooner. As passed by lawmakers, the bill would have allowed a temporary regulatory framework for hemp beverages to remain in place until December 31, 2026. Gov. DeWine used his line-item veto authority to remove that provision, accelerating the ban.

The law does include language stating that if federal policy changes to allow higher-THC hemp products in the future, the Ohio legislature intends to review and potentially revise state law.

Governor's Crackdown on Intoxicating Hemp Continues Amid Legal Challenges

Gov. DeWine has repeatedly emphasized the need to crack down on what he characterizes as an unregulated intoxicating hemp market. Earlier this year, he issued emergency rules banning the sale of such products for 90 days and urged lawmakers to enact permanent regulations.

A county judge has since blocked enforcement of those emergency rules in response to a legal challenge, adding further uncertainty to the regulatory landscape.

Advocates Say Referendum Is About Preserving Voter Intent

Supporters of the referendum argue that SB 56 goes well beyond regulating hemp and instead reverses key elements of the marijuana legalization initiative Ohioans approved just two years ago.

“SB 56 forcefully defies the will of the voters of Ohio, who spoke clearly on this issue,” Willard said. “This campaign is about protecting personal freedom, small businesses and the integrity of the ballot process.”

Whether activists can gather enough signatures in time remains an open question but if successful, Ohio voters could once again find themselves deciding the future of cannabis policy at the ballot box.

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