

North Shore hosts 3 pot-law forums

BY BRENT RICHTER, NORTH SHORE NEWS MARCH 5, 2013



Illegal marijuana grow ops feed gang profits and flood the streets with cheap drugs, say activists seeking to change Canada's pot laws.

Photograph by: file photo, North Shore NEWS

IT'S time to bury Canada's marijuana laws in favour of a legal and regulated market for cannabis.

That's the message from a number of experts scheduled to speak at anti-prohibition forums on the North Shore this week.

Dr. Evan Wood, founder of Stop the Violence B.C., is speaking at three local events between Wednesday and Saturday, to promote a plan for taking the marijuana trade out of a violent, unregulated market motivated by profits for organized crime and into a regulated market whose motive is public health and safety.

"We'll be in North Vancouver for a sober conversation that is needed about the incredible waste of tax dollars and, increasingly, human life that has resulted from cannabis prohibition," Wood said. "It's been much more than simply ineffective, it's contributed to a whole host of unintended consequences."

Wood founded the organization of professionals after a particularly bloody week overseeing the emergency room at Vancouver General Hospital in 2009 when retaliatory gang wars led to a record number of shootings in the Lower Mainland.

Coincidentally, a second anti-prohibition group, Sensible B.C., is holding public forums on the North Shore throughout the week to draw attention to its own decriminalization campaign.

Sensible B.C. founder Dana Larsen, a pot activist and former federal NDP candidate for West Vancouver-Sunshine Coast-Sea to Sky Country, is gearing up for a province-wide petition campaign to force a referendum that would decriminalize simple possession of the drug as a first step to full legalization.

Much like the anti-HST recall initiative, Sensible B.C. must get signatures from 10 per cent of registered voters in every B.C. electoral district to trigger a referendum. If approved, the referendum would amend the Police Act to deprioritize arrests and prosecutions for simple possession cases and call on the federal government to take possession of marijuana out of the Criminal Code of Canada.

Wood frequently hears criticisms that his approach will lead to more widespread access and use by minors, adverse mental and physical health problems, impaired driving and criminal activity. But all of those things exist already and flourish as a result of prohibition, Wood said.

"Right now, society is collectively burying its head in the sand hoping that the problems with outlaw motorcycle gangs and other groups involved in the cannabis industry will somehow go away when the reality is they are here and exist because the illegal cannabis market is, to use the words of the RCMP, the 'jet fuel of organized crime,'" he said.

As for the health effects, Wood said studies that have linked the drug with mental illness have been flawed, and health effects are negligible with moderate use.

"I don't think it's safe, but I think for your average person who experiments with cannabis and doesn't use very much, there's probably limited, if any harm."

When Washington state and Colorado voters overturned their state bans on marijuana last year in favour of legalized and regulated distribution, the tired argument that Canada can't pursue pot reform for fear of creating a legal chasm with our neighbours fell apart, Wood said.

"Someone has just given a solid kick to the base of the house of cards and it's inevitably going to come down as these changes happen in the U.S.," he said.

Public opinion polls by Angus Reid have pegged public support for legalization around 75 per cent in

B.C., while the Union of B.C. Municipalities has also endorsed decriminalization and top contenders in the federal Liberal Party leadership races are all on board, Wood added.

With the evidence and the general public on his side and the winds of change beginning to blow in his favour, there's only one problem. The federal Conservatives are going in the exact opposite direction, having recently changed the Criminal Code to include mandatory jail sentences for people caught growing as few as six pot plants.

"It's extremely difficult to reconcile. I don't know that I can. It's somewhat mind boggling," Wood said.

Stop the Violence's forum brings together experts Werner Antweiller, a Sauder School of Business economist, Geoff Plant, former attorney general of B.C. and MLA Kash Heed, former head of the Downtown Eastside drug squad and former West Vancouver police chief to talk about economic, legal and enforcement issues that have made prohibition a "40-year-experiment gone wrong." The event runs Thursday at the District of North Vancouver's council chamber at 6:30 p.m.

Sensible B.C. is hosting two forums, one at the Kay Meek Centre in West Vancouver today, Wednesday, at 7 p.m. and again at Memorial Recreation Centre on Mount Seymour Parkway on Saturday at 7 p.m.

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