

north shore news

City of North Vancouver mulls medical marijuana shops

Licence request sparks pot dispensary debate

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Michael Wuest, co-owner of Weeds Glass and Gifts, is looking to operate a medical marijuana dispensary from his store at 991 Marine Dr. in North Vancouver. Photo Mike Wakefield

The City of North Vancouver is mulling a business licence application from a resident who is strongly intent on opening the first medical marijuana dispensary in the community.

Weeds Glass and Gifts at 991 Marine Dr. had a “soft opening” in April, and now store co-owner Michael Wuest wants to provide medical marijuana to North Shore residents who he says are crossing the bridge to get prescription cannabis.

“Hopefully, we will be up and running soon — and not just to open and close, but to stay,” Wuest told the News on Monday.

As it stands, Weeds, which only sells pot paraphernalia at this point and not the drug itself, is operating in the city without a business licence because it's part of a compassion club.

The Marine Drive location is one of a string of stores in the Weeds Glass and Gifts chain headquartered in Vancouver and which sells medical marijuana in its shops across the water.

It's a grey market in the City of Vancouver where medicinal pot dispensaries have been proliferating at such a fast pace that city officials are now looking at regulating and thereby legitimizing those businesses.

It is illegal to sell medical marijuana over the counter — under Health Canada regulations, patients are given dried buds by mail order from federally licensed growers — but so far the unsanctioned shops have continued to operate in Vancouver with little intervention from law enforcement.

According to Wuest, there are roadblocks for patients that take the regulated medicinal marijuana avenue, including having to register with the federal government.

“We basically know what conditions Health Canada issues licences for, and (in Vancouver) we cut to the chase,” said Wuest, adding that his customers are looking for relief from ailments ranging from chronic sleep issues to depression.

When asked about potential public health concerns should a pot dispensary open in the city, Dr. Mark Lysyshyn, medical health

officer for the North Shore, said there are many. "We suspect a lot of people who want recreational marijuana are obtaining it through these dispensaries," said Lysyshyn.

There is also no quality control for the marijuana that could potentially be mouldy or contain pesticides, according to Lysyshyn.

Lysyshyn said he would support North Van city in developing marijuana dispensary regulations such as restricting the operating hours and limiting the distance of the businesses from schools.

When it comes to verifying their clients' documentation, Wuest said Weeds is vigilant about that. "We obviously don't sell to minors," said Wuest. "We need proof of ID before we even consider providing someone with cannabis or any of its products."

However, just last week, Vancouver police raided a Weeds store in that city after it was alleged a 15-year-old was hospitalized after consuming one of their edible products.

Wuest said he has heard conflicting stories about the age of the person who became sick and whether or not the pot was sold at the store, adding the company is still investigating the incident.

Weeds wants to be as above board as possible, said Wuest, which is why he has approached the city for a licence.

City of North Vancouver spokesperson Connie Rabold confirmed Weeds has requested a business licence, but said it is for retail purposes, not dispensing medical marijuana.

While there is no category for medical pot dispensary permits right now, the subject is expected to go before city council in the weeks ahead, said Rabold, adding that this is the first formal request.

Four years ago a medical marijuana dispensary was attempted for Deep Cove but North Van district council put the kibosh on those plans after voting unanimously to ban dispensaries unless the federal government decides to regulate them.

Wuest said Weeds wants to contribute by paying taxes to the city and employing people in the community, which so far hasn't welcomed the business with open arms.

"It took us a year to find a landlord that was willing to go with us," said Wuest. "Some of them just don't want to have anything to do with cannabis at all."

Coun. Rod Clark supports people using medicinal marijuana and goes one step further, saying Canada needs to go the way of Washington State and completely legalize marijuana.

"To me, marijuana is no big deal. So as far as I'm concerned, the sooner we go to legalization the better," said Clark, adding it would need to be done in a studious fashion similar to the Washington State model.

Should Wuest start selling medicinal marijuana from his North Van storefront, it will be up to the RCMP to decide how they will enforce the law around controlled substances.

"All businesses in our communities are expected to operate within the law," stated RCMP Federal Criminal Operations spokesperson Sgt. Laurie White, in an email. "Anyone violating the law may find themselves the subject of a criminal investigation and subsequently answering to the courts for their actions."