

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Medicinal Marijuana Referendum Sent To Governor deJongh

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The 30th Legislature approved a number of bills on Monday, and included amongst the throng is a measure asking voters how they feel about making medicinal marijuana legal in the United States Virgin Islands.

If signed into law by Governor John P. deJongh, it would clear the way for a non-binding referendum on November 4th's ballot.

The ballot question reads: "Should the Legislature consider legislation that allows for the licensing and regulation of medicinal marijuana patients, care-givers, cultivators and distribution centers?"

Voters would be able check a "yes" or "no" box.

The debate amongst Senators concerning the referendum became rather heated, with Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly making clear her opposition, contending that the bill was a gateway to more liberal measures, such as the legalization and decriminalization marijuana for recreational use.

Senate President Shawn-Michael Malone clarified his stance, stating that the bill was only to allow the people's opinion on the matter to be heard, giving Senators a better understanding of where the populace stands on the issue.

Meanwhile the bill's sponsor Sen. Terrance Nelson, who sponsored the same measure some two years ago, said that he wasn't asking anyone to vote on the legalization of the drug: "I'm not asking you today to vote to legalize medicinal marijuana," Nelson said. "I'm asking you to let this go before the people."

In the end, 12 out of 14 Senators voted for the bill, which has been sent to the governor amongst a myriad of other measures. Said Senators include: Craig Barshinger, Diane Capehart, Donald Cole, Kenneth Gittens, Clifford Graham, Alicia Hansen, Myron Jackson, Malone, Nelson, Clarence Payne III, Tregenza Roach and Sanes.

Those who voted against the measure are Sen. Janette Millin Young and Rivera-O'Reilly. Senator Judi Buckley was absent.

Other measures passed on Monday are:

- A bill amending the Hotel Development Act to allow hotel developments on Water Island and outlying cays to participate in the benefit program. The bill was amended to increase the amount the hotels participating in the program would have to earmark for scholarships from \$20,000 to \$100,000.
- A bill to abolish the Casino Control Commission Fund under the V.I. Finance Department and replace it with a checking account within the commission. The measure also requires an audit of the account that is reported annually to the Legislature.
- A bill to provide a clearer definition for the crime of interfering with an officer discharging his duty.
- A bill amending the criminal code to remove "intimidate" to avoid any gray area for a judge's discretion in sentencing leaving the Virgin Islands Hate-Motivates Crimes Act as the sole statute under which hate crimes will be prosecuted.
- A bill abolishing pension payments to spouses of deceased governors and lieutenant governors.
- A resolution honoring Elizabeth Lynch for her service and culinary contributions to the Virgin Islands.
- A resolution to name the sports complex to be built on St. Croix after Horace Clark.

- A bill to appropriate \$100,000 from the General Fund to the University of the Virgin Islands to create a distinguished professorship in international relations and diplomacy in honor of Ambassador Terence Todman and name the airport access road, Route 302, on St. Thomas after him.
- A bill to honor former Sen. John Bell and name the Golden Grove Adult Correctional Facility after him.
- A bill to authorize the sale of parcel No. 40 CB Estate Taarenberg, St. Thomas.
- A bill to name the northwest end of Veterans Drive the William Henry Hastie Park, in honor of the territory's only black appointed governor.
- A bill amending the V.I. Code as it relates to the practice of dentistry in the territory.
- A bill to give government retirees the option of receiving either a paper check stub for their annuity payment or a digital pay stub. A handful of unrelated amendments were attached to the bill.