

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Medicinal Marijuana Could Be Legal In USVI Before Mapp Leaves Office

VIC News / **Published On December 19, 2018 10:40 AM /**

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The medicinal marijuana bill that has seen numerous hearings in various committees in the 32nd Legislature, and [even the 31st before it](#), could be out of the Senate by Friday and headed to Governor Kenneth Mapp, who has signaled his support for a medicinal marijuana industry in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In years past, the hostility against anything related to marijuana had defeated advocates of the drug, with former Attorney General Claude Walker and Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly being staunch opposers who stymied the measure's progress.

But with Mr. Walker [resigning from his post recently](#), and with Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly's tenure coming to an end, opposition has all but stopped, and the bill, sponsored by outgoing Senator Positive Nelson, could become law before Governor-elect Albert Bryan takes office on January 7.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly was present during a Monday hearing in the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, where she again pointed out her concerns with the measure. She said while the bill's sponsor, Mr. Nelson, has said smoking was not the intent of the legislation, throughout the bill smoking of marijuana is not prohibited. "If it doesn't say you cannot smoke, then I would have to take the position that smoking can be allowed," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.

She pointed out that the bill allows individuals to have a combination of 12 plants, mature or immature, in the amount produced from the patient's allowable plants if they are processed at the property where they are cultivated. "In my opinion, from reading the bill, it doesn't say whether the plants need to be grown indoors, or if it can be grown outdoors," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said. Proponents of the measure contended that such decisions should be determined in rules and regulations that would govern the medicinal marijuana industry outside the bill itself.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly highlighted yet another issue, this time one related to patients arriving in the territory approved to use the drug for treatment. The bill says the patients must provide documentation confirming that they are indeed authorized to use medicinal marijuana for treatment. The bill also says the treatment must take place at "the inpatient facility".

"What are these facilities going to look like?" Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly asked. The proponent testifier said rules and regulations should also govern such decisions, an answer that did not satisfy the senator.

"I believe a lot of the concerns that some of us have, [that] I have in particular, could be addressed through the legislation rather than through regulations. There is no guarantee that the board that gets put in place will in fact deal with these concerns through the regulations once it has left the Legislature," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.

The bill will be heard in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday. If approved, it could go before the full Senate in a session scheduled for Friday.

Senior Pastor of Speak the Word Ministries on St. Croix, Dexter Skepple, made a plea during the hearing calling for senators to abandon efforts to legalize medical marijuana. He spoke of a young man who had been gunned down in another man's marijuana farm. "I did so much to help this young man to get him from where he was to where he needed to be, and to see the suffering it brings as a result of what happens to the mother and what happens to a child afterwards..." Mr. Skepple said the young man was taken to a drug rehabilitation center in Texas, only to leave the facility before going through the full treatment process.

"What do we say to his mom, what do we say to the other mothers who suffer? Once a young man gets on drugs, he gets to a place where he becomes a young man who is uncontrollable at times. He comes to a point in his life where he does things that he

would not normally do," Mr. Skepple said.

Senators, however, [who had expressed their support for the bill less than a month ago](#), held to their stance.

During a November 27 hearing, Senator Sammuel Sanes, who had opposed the measure in the past, said, "Studies have been done, research has been concluded, I stand ready to vote."

"I am not ready for the legalization of marijuana, but medical marijuana I support," said said Senator Dwayne DeGraff.

"I'm supportive of medical marijuana legislation. The train has already left the station, 32 states and the District of Columbia have already signed on to this, and I truly believe that it's inevitable and that we will certainly need to fall in line," said Senator Novelle Francis.

The bill's main sponsor, Mr. Nelson, said during the November 27 hearing, "We are at a dawning of a new day," as he positioned himself to be the chief proponent and defender of the implementation of the drug's medical use in the U.S.V.I. "All of the major financial journals, media networks, economists, medical journals and societies, 33 states, Washington D.C. and 3 territories — and 56.7 percent of Virgin Islanders all agree with my position."