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Rasta Organization Asks for 'Safety Net' For Locals in Development of Cannabis Market in USVI

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One Rastafarian organization in the U.S. Virgin Islands is making recommendations for locals to capitalize on the cannabis industry due to launch within a year.

When Tafari Tzaddi, President of the Virgin Islands Rastafari Sacramental Cannabis Council Inc. appeared before the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture on Wednesday, he presented a 12-point list of recommendations that will allow indigenous Virgin Islanders to receive first preference in the development of the local cannabis market.

“I know that the outside entities are going to come on in. They’re coming with their money ...it’s hard to stop these entities that’s coming in with these millions,” he said.

The nonprofit entity is requesting “consideration and affluence” within the construction of the Cannabis Social Equity Program that will allow Rastafarians, previously persecuted for using cannabis as sacrament, sovereign rights within the new laws and newly-legal marketplace. Mr. Tzaddi said in order to minimize the risk of predatory investors, predatory contracts and exploitation by unscrupulous actors, locals should be protected by a safety net for some time.

“Within this, we also ask that the people of Virgin Islands be given an extended period to establish this industry locally and to not allow outside or foreign investment until the local establishments have been finalized,” he said.

Among the major asks are exemptions from permit costs or licenses, tax reductions and eliminations, the implementation of educational and business grants for access, priority funding for state-funded small business grants and loans and priority licensing for Rastafarians.

In fact, Mr. Tzaddi wants all applicants deemed a member of Rastafari Nation to be given priority within all aspects of the business model. “If jurisdiction disagreements occur with outside investors or new business owners in potential business areas, those that use Cannabis in sacrament, [should] be given priority compassion as their sovereign right,” he added.

Mr. Tzaddi also spoke to the preservation of Rastafari culture, requesting access to a funded lease for the preservation of a Rastafari Culture Center – a recommendation that Committee Chair Senator Javan James seemed amenable to. The site would provide a home for local farmers’ markets and act as a museum or educational center for people to learn about the true local Rastafari culture, he said.

Lastly, Mr. Tzaddi requested that within the amnesty framework, all those incarcerated for the use, sale or cultivation of cannabis not only be released and exonerated but given access to funding. “I just pray that we can protect the locals. When you talk about the local guys in the community that have been dispensing, where does it really leave them?” he asked.

“During these unprecedented times of evolution within the space of Cannabis you can see that every state within the United States has deemed certain financial space for those that have been persecuted during Cannabis prohibition. “We must duplicate this concept by creating our own unique educational basis locally,” Mr. Tzaddi argued.

The Office of Cannabis Regulations (OCR) has been given \$250,000 that they are expected to use for initiatives including training, expungement and micro lending but could not at this time offer clarity on how that lending would be disbursed.

However attorney Kye Walker, legal adviser to the governor including on cannabis legislation, noted that there is at least one advantage built into the Social Equity Plan that can benefit Rastafarians.

“Should anyone who’s Rastafarian - can demonstrate that they’re legitimately Rastafarian - apply for a license, they get an automatic 15 percent advantage,” Ms. Walker explained. She said they can use that leverage to attract foreign investors who have the capital to set up businesses in the USVI.

Ms. Walker further explained that the suggestions Mr. Tzaddi put before lawmakers are beyond the ability of the OCR to adopt. “The OCR doesn’t have the authority to grant tax benefits, it doesn’t have the authority to waive license fees – those are all policy issues that I believe the 34th Legislature considered and decided that this 15 percent advantage would be sufficient,” she stated.

The Rastafari Sacramental Cannabis Council Inc. currently has 60 members which includes persons from the Theocracy Reign of the Ancient Divine Order of The Nyahbinghi, the Ethiopian African Black International Congress (Bobo Shanti) and the Ethiopian World Federation Inc.

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