

Comment: Best pot-regulation system already in place

Stephanie Smith and Damian Kettlewell / Times Colonist

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On Dec. 13, the federal government took the first step toward legalizing the sale of non-medical marijuana in Canada with the release of the Federal Task Force on Marijuana Legalization report, which recommends that the retail sale and regulation of marijuana should be handled by the provinces.

The B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union and the B.C. Private Liquor Store Association formed the Responsible Marijuana Retail Alliance of B.C. in 2015 to work together on a common goal: to see legal, non-medical marijuana warehoused and distributed through the existing Liquor Distribution Branch system, and sold in B.C. along with alcohol in liquor stores.

The alliance agrees that it is the provinces' responsibility to regulate the sale and distribution of marijuana after it is legalized by the federal government. British Columbia already has an efficient system in place to handle the sale of controlled substances. Our public and private liquor stores are regulated and, in the large majority of cases, have above 90 per cent compliance rates for age verification. Youth in B.C. have a much more difficult time accessing alcohol than tobacco.

The task force also tries to influence the regulatory process by recommending that marijuana not be co-located in stores that sell liquor or tobacco, citing the possibility of promoting co-use of these controlled substances.

We agree with a public-policy approach that discourages co-consumption of marijuana, alcohol and tobacco, but we believe this goal can be achieved in many ways within B.C.'s existing regulated public/private sales and distribution model — possibly through signs, protected point-of-sale areas or a store-within-a-store model.

To date, there is no credible evidence that co-location leads to increased co-use. Gambling services have been available in B.C. bars, lounges and casino venues for years without complaint. Pain-relief medication is widely available alongside cold and allergy treatments without reports of increased co-use.

On the distribution side, the LDB operates a secure network that already transports hundreds of millions of dollars in controlled substances every year. Creating a parallel system would be unnecessarily costly and time-consuming. Funds would be diverted from important public services such as education and health care to duplicate the existing distribution network.

Our two organizations have not taken a stand on the legalization or consumption of non-medical marijuana. With legalization underway, we believe marijuana should be sold in the most socially responsible way possible.

Looking south of the border to Colorado and Washington, once their systems were up and running, tax revenues from marijuana sales exceeded forecasts in both states. This year, marijuana sales in Colorado are on pace to contribute \$188 million US to state coffers, to fund education capital construction and health programs.

Profits from B.C. Public Liquor Stores and distribution network contribute more than \$880 million annually to education, health care and other necessary public services. These funds help keep other taxes down. The B.C. government could regulate marijuana as it does the liquor industry, with tax revenue for distribution and retail sales approaching that from alcohol over time.

We have a real opportunity ahead of us in B.C. The BCGEU and BCPLSA, through our alliance, are ready to work with our partners at all levels of government to ensure that marijuana legalization benefits our province while reducing risk.

If done properly, with the appropriate regulatory oversight and safeguards in place, legalized marijuana can create jobs and generate public revenue to fund public services.

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