

NEWS

Jenna Shankman: Adopting safe and sound medical cannabis rules

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We in Santa Cruz County are proud of our commitments to environmental stewardship, progressive thinking, community betterment and the well-being of our young people. These values have been challenged recently with medical cannabis. Enormous efforts have been made over the past four years to develop a plan that balances the needs of all factions of the community including the cannabis industry, patients, youth, neighbors and the environment. The health and well-being of our community is of paramount concern. And while significant progress has been made, much work remains.

As a community we have been working hard to establish reasonable regulations that promote environmentally and socially conscious business practices that allow for adequate supply of medical cannabis while upholding the health and safety of the greater community. Recent events in Santa Cruz County and the surrounding areas can be an impetus for us to push harder and come together to finish what we started.

- Nearly 4,500 acres, 12 homes, and 16 out buildings burned in the Loma Fires in late September and early October apparently started on a cannabis farm.
- A cannabis grow related fire in the Forest Lakes community of Felton in August threatened surrounding homes and neighbors.
- Three people were injured in a shootout over a cannabis robbery in Watsonville on Sept. 28.

We know responsible cannabis industry members and advocates, public health leaders, community members and local decision makers all want to work together to create policies and practices that prevent these types of incidents. A strong framework is taking shape, but what many of us have worked toward and are so close to achieving continues to be threatened by irresponsible practices, lack of accountability, individual greed and an uncertainty of what future regulations will encompass.

To overcome these challenges we need to protect sections of the proposed county 7.128 ordinance (Licenses for the Commercial Cultivation of Medical Cannabis) that provide safeguards against fire hazards as well as overall safety concerns. These include restrictions for small acreage parcels in rural neighborhoods; restrictions for timberland production zones; and setbacks from neighboring properties, parks and youth-sensitive sites. Essential to maintaining accountability and safety is enforcement of the regulations set forth in our ordinance and implementation of consequences including license revocation for non-compliant businesses.

We also propose to integrate standards that address well-documented black market diversions, increase accountability and provide for a mechanism to assess impacts. One example is prohibiting manufacturing that involves use of volatile substances so as to greatly reduce fire and safety concerns.

Industry fees and taxes are essential to ensure we have adequate resources to monitor compliance with the new ordinance, protect our youth and prevent future tragedies. The revenue generated can pay a variety of important community protection functions, including: random grow site inspection with citations and compliance mandates for non-compliant cultivators; wildlife and public health impact assessments; third party certifications; and development and implementation of a track and trace system. These fees and taxes are essential to both the community and the newly developing industry — establishing a foundation for a healthy, legal industry that serves everyone's interests and concerns.

When tragedy hits, communities can be further divided, point fingers and sit stagnant, or we can be united, seek solutions, and move toward a brighter future that supports our community as a whole. We invite you to join the discussion and become active in community deliberations to help us move toward sound and safe regulations of medical cannabis in ways that address the needs of patients, industry, neighbors and our youth-today and for generations to come.

Submitted by Shebreh Kalantari-Johnson and Jenna Shankman on behalf of Santa Cruz County Community Prevention Partners. .

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