

In favor of pot

By David Levinsky Staff writer | Posted: Thursday, December 1, 2011 5:45 am

Most New Jersey voters don't view marijuana as a particularly dangerous drug anymore.

A new poll by the Rutgers-Eagleton Institute of Politics found that more than half of state voters believe penalties for use of the drug should be reduced, and more than 80 percent support allowing the use of the drug for medical purposes.

Released Wednesday, the poll also found that 55 percent of voters believe penalties for possession of small amounts of marijuana should be eliminated, and 35 percent support legalizing the sale and use of pot.

By comparison, in 1972 only 40 percent supported reducing penalties for marijuana use, and 34 percent agreed that penalties for possession of small amounts of the drug should be eliminated. In 1972, 21 percent supported legalizing the drug.

The recent poll is based on a random survey of 753 registered voters conducted earlier this month.

Poll director David Redlawsk said the findings show that attitudes about marijuana have become more relaxed over the decades, and that most New Jerseyans now support permitting its use for medical purposes.

"When we first asked these questions in the early 1970s, Garden Staters were much less supportive," Redlawsk said. "The change since then is significant but not unexpected. What is new is the wide support for medical marijuana, even among those who otherwise oppose reducing or eliminating penalties for recreational use."

Such public support has not resulted in the speedy implementation of New Jersey's medical marijuana program, which has been beset with delays, nor has it resulted in movement on legislation to decriminalize possession of small amounts of the drug.

Former Gov. Jon S. Corzine signed legislation legalizing medical marijuana in 2010 before he left office, but New Jersey's program to govern growing and distributing the drug by nonprofit alternative treatment centers is still not up and running.

Christie has said the delays were needed to make sure the program was strictly controlled.

Medical marijuana advocates have been critical of the governor, claiming that the delays were not necessary, and that the rules his administration created were overly strict and have caused much of the difficulties in getting the program launched.

More recently, the six nonprofit groups selected to grow and dispense pot in New Jersey have had trouble locating marijuana farms and dispensaries.

Last month, the Maple Shade Zoning Board decided that a medical marijuana dispensary was not an appropriate use for a vacant furniture store on Route 38. The board ruled after numerous residents spoke out at a public hearing.

Westampton has decided that another nonprofit group must get special approval from the township's Land Development Board before it can set up a dispensary and indoor farm in a vacant warehouse near the New Jersey Turnpike interchange.

Chris Goldstein, a spokesman for the Coalition for Medical Marijuana-New Jersey, said nonprofit groups have been forced to re-argue the values of medical marijuana despite the law's passage two years ago.

"Unfortunately, what we've seen on the local level is a retrial of medical marijuana," Goldstein said.

He said Christie is to blame because of his lukewarm support for the program. "The local (governments) are following the lead of Gov. Christie," Goldstein said.

Christie has said he would not force a municipality to permit opening a medical marijuana facility within its borders.

Goldstein said the delays would force patients with debilitating illnesses to continue to rely on illegal sales of the drug.

He said decriminalization would benefit patients as well as city and municipal police forces, which are under financial strain and wasting time and manpower enforcing petty marijuana laws.

Legislation to criminalize possession of 15 grams or less of marijuana has been introduced in the state Assembly, but it is awaiting a hearing before the Judiciary Committee. It has 20 sponsors.

"Decriminalization makes sense to the common person, and for police and public safety it could save a lot of jobs," Goldstein said. "It's a very smart move."