

EAST OREGONIAN

Ahead of the curve

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With the legalization of recreational marijuana by Oregon voters last week head shops have a lot of room to grow.

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Commission also must start accepting license applications for retail bot businesses by at least January 4, 2016 — but it could be sooner.

The business spike at Thur's seemed to signal booming sales down the road.

"I talk to guys in Washington and they say after (legalization) passed there was a spurt, then it just kept growing," said Thurman. "They say it's been better than ever."

Setting regulations for recreational marijuana is a tectonic process that has barely begun to move, despite high interest bordering on impatience. The OLCC has very little groundwork in place so far, but their week-old marijuana newsletter already has 3,000 subscribers.

Cities can opt out of retail stores

Owners of local head shops brace for a new era of business.

Last Wednesday was a busy day at Thur's, Pendleton's newest head shop. The night before, voters in Oregon, Alaska and Washington, D.C., legalized recreational marijuana.

"It was actually one of our busiest days. Everyone seemed pretty excited about it," said Bryson Thurman, 25, the store's owner. "People were saying 'Hell, yeah! I knew it was going to pass.'"

Recreational use is still months away from being legal, but not for long. Come July 1, everyone over 21 can smoke, possess and grow marijuana privately in Oregon. The Oregon Liquor Control

Measure 91 allows counties and cities to ban pot businesses by popular vote. Before that question could go to the ballot in a city or county, it would have to review its current regulations. Then, it's possible the city or county could ask voters whether they want marijuana retail stores around at all. More than 64 percent of voters in the Umatilla County went against Measure 91 last Tuesday.

"I think it's a very good indicator about how residents feel about recreational marijuana," said Tamra Mabbott, head of the county's planning department and chair of the task force. "Cities may take a different path, because cities make their own laws."

Pendleton has that power, too, but hasn't had much discussion about it yet.

"I think we were waiting to see if the ballot measure passed," said city attorney Nancy Kerns. "Now we're interested in what the OLCC is going to do with it."

But there's no question that the game has changed. Oregonians will be able to use, possess and grow up to a certain point no matter what local municipalities say. The question is only about what the dispensaries will look like — and smokeshops seem ready-made to take up that role when the time comes. They already sell water pipes, might they soon sell the fuel, too?

"They're used for 'herbal smoking blends,'" said Angela Treadwell, manager of Wicked Kitty Tattoo and Piercing. "Most people know if it's for something illegal they're not supposed to talk about it."

Wicked Kitty's Green Room is a green closet in the back of its parlor, a room dedicated to the sale of smoking accessories. Wicked Kitty only went into the glassware business in April of last year but it's already second only in revenues to tattooing. Treadwell declined to note just what those revenues were but said "it's a very profitable business."

But if they go into the marijuana business depends on what the regulations look like, said Treadwell. She said the OLCC could limit the number of stores per capita, as they do with liquor stores and licenses.

"It's going to be race to see who gets it," said Treadwell. "It might be an already open store, it might be a brand new business. So we're kind of holding our cards."

Thurman said he, too, would consider taking the plunge, depending on how the regulations turn out. Whether he sells marijuana or not, he sees head shops poised to grow as marijuana laws across the country begin to relax.

Kevin Garcia, owner of Out in Action on 318 S. Main, said he thinks his business will pick up.

"I think people will be more open-minded and willing to buy tobacco accessories," said Garcia, 24. "If they want to buy it for marijuana, that's on them."

He wonders why the county or city would turn away the revenues that come from taxing weed.

"The problem's already there. If people are smoking pot, they're smoking pot," said Garcia. "Why are you going to let people in the black market sell it when you can tax it? Like they said on the news: Criminals don't card people, businesses do."

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