



INSIDER NJ

Marijuana Legalization Issue Could Drive Up Lobbying Spending in 2018

JEFF BRINDLE • March 21, 2018, 3:36 pm

An analysis issued by the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) revealed that over \$90 million was spent on lobbying in 2017.

Driving expenditures were Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey and PSE&G, along with a bevy of other heavy hitters.

This year promises to be no different. With many of last year's issues still lingering, and with new issues front and center, spending by lobbyists in 2018 will equal, if not exceed, 2017 totals.

One issue sure to arouse interest involves marijuana use. Should its use be legalized? As a compromise should it be decriminalized? Or, should the issue be put to the vote of the people?

These are the battle lines that have been drawn.

State Senator Nicholas P. Scutari (D-Union) introduced legislation to legalize the possession of marijuana for personal and recreational use. The bill creates a Division of marijuana Enforcement and Licensing. In the Assembly, Reed Gusciora (D-Mercer) introduced a companion bill.

In an effort to forge a compromise acceptable to supporters and opponents of legalization, State Senators Ronald Rice (D-Essex and Robert Singer R-Ocean) introduced legislation to decriminalize the use of Marijuana.

Under the bill, penalties would be issued based on the amount of marijuana in possession.

A third option includes placing a referendum on the ballot to allow voters to decide the issue.

Within the Legislature and among legislative leaders there is no consensus. Supporters and opponents of marijuana legalization are lining up on both sides of the political aisle. Many remain undecided.

One leader, however, is unequivocal in his support for legalization, Governor Phil Murphy.

With the above as back story, the crystallization of marijuana legalization into a major and potentially contentious issue, is certain. Equally predictable is that the issue will bring with it intense lobbying activity.

Already numerous interests have signaled their participation in advocating for and against legalization. At this juncture, about 14 groups and individuals have positioned themselves for or against legalization.

Included among the advocacy groups are the New Jersey Cannabis Industry Association, New Jersey CannaBusiness Association, Drug Policy Alliance, and Compassionate Sciences.

Counted among those opposed are New Jersey Responsible Approaches to Marijuana Policy, Automobile Association of America (AAA) and Insurance Council of New Jersey.

The writing is on the wall. The effort to legalize marijuana will generate significant spending activity by special interests on both sides of the issue.

Annual reports filed for 2017 indicate that early skirmishing on the issue already has generated about \$250,000 in fees paid to professional lobbyists.

In eight other States where marijuana legalization has been considered, mostly through passage of ballot questions, lobbying on the issue alone has witnessed about \$82 million in spending.

It is likely, then, that adding Marijuana to the issue mix in New Jersey could drive special interests spending on traditional lobbying and issue advocacy to record levels in 2018, perhaps \$100 million.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission.

The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.