

Michael Saxl Testimony in Support of LD 40

March 4, 2024

Senator Hickman, Representative Supica, and distinguished members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs committee.

My name is Michael Saxl, I am the managing principal of Maine Street Solutions, government affairs division of the law firm Verrill Dana. I'm here today to testify in support of the amendment to LD 40. My first message to you today is that LD 40 is the next step in destigmatizing cannabis as a recreational drug. My second message is that the legislation before you is a deliberate, thoughtful construction intended to simplify cannabis regulations, while maintaining public safety.

My work on legalized cannabis started in 1996 when I was Majority Whip in the Maine House, and I co-sponsored legislation initiated by my friend Representative Cassie Stevens from Orono. We had a crew of young legislators called the "Kid's Caucus", and we all understood that some of our friends smoked cannabis, and some drank beer, and some did both. We knew it wasn't really a big deal, but we also knew that a legalized market was an important foundation to destigmatize consumption of cannabis and eliminate an illicit unregulated market.

After my service in the Legislature, cannabis was still not legal. Early on, Maine Street Solutions was hired by the Drug Policy Alliance, to address numerous issues. We were early movers in opening access to naloxone, making it available for administration to people who were suffering from opiate overdose. In 2010, we also convened the first large scale public cannabis summit – at that time focusing on the expanded medical market - with Montel Williams, held at USM. I bet some of you were there when then State Senator Dion held the match for Montel to light up on stage to help with his symptoms of multiple sclerosis. Certainly, Montel got some credit for the WOW factor, but really it was a major TV star, normalizing what should be a normal behavior: a guy in pain taking some medicine to alleviate that pain. Let's keep Montel in mind as we have this discussion.

There's a lot more history to discuss including Representative Boyer's help in unifying two separate citizen initiatives on legalization, and several Governor LePage vetoes for implementation of the cannabis initiative. Governor LePage wanted to merge the medical and adult use cannabis markets, the legislature saw value in both markets.

What I want to go to next however is the negotiation between the Christian Civic League and recreational cannabis supporters in the tasting room of Senator Timberlake's cider operations. On a Saturday morning, Senator Timberlake, Representative Dillingham, Carol Conley from the Christian Civic League, Joel Pepin and his partner Ryan, Matt Hawes, myself, and a few other folks got together. In that room we negotiated the framework of Maine's current cannabis policy. We gave up social clubs, lower taxes, and lots and lots of small details, and we gained broad bipartisan support that could overcome a gubernatorial veto. The compromise was reported on everywhere from Rolling Stone to Maine Public Radio. At the time, we all knew that after the compromise we would go our own ways, the Christian Civic League would remain opposed to cannabis, and we would continue to look for reasonable reforms.

It's now been six years since implementation. We've learned a lot during that time. The language in LD 40 includes some of the original language passed by the people of Maine, some from other states who have had successful implementation, and some copied and pasted from our alcohol statute.

You will hear from opponents that this is reckless, somehow undermining the safety of our children. That's hogwash. The new language around child safety was basically cut and pasted from Maine's current alcohol statutes. It's just another example of stigma. For some reason there are people who have not been able to turn the corner and realize that cannabis is a legal, regulated product that, like any other recreational product, needs reasonable regulations.

However, the danger of maintaining the status quo, is that it leaves an open door for the Triad's, (who have been widely reported on as Chinese mafia illegal grows in Maine) of this world who can grow in the illicit market and sell into the legal market. We need a framework of regulations that meets the safety guidelines that protect Maine citizens, while easing over burdensome rules that are contributing to the growth of the illegal market.

There's nothing in this bill that has not been discussed in this committee over the last six years. There's nothing in this bill that wasn't part of the discussion at the Marijuana Legalization Implementation committee. This is a good piece of legislation that will take the next step forward for legalized cannabis in Maine.