County pushes cannabis policy onward with new sights
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In what seemed like a deep breath for Yolo County, Tuesday's supervisors' meeting centered around a cannabis workshop that aimed to hash out the next steps in making local policy.

The workshop hosted a familiar set of people in the less familiar Yolo County Office of Education. In a small conference room, supervisors wore lavaliere microphones, and attendees munched on provided refreshments.

After over a year of hammering out the future's local cannabis policy, the meeting engaged the clutch between 2017 and 2018, allowing supervisors, staff and the community to pick the next gear. And while the cannabis industry has gained something of a foothold with legal recreational use, it's clear that Yolo County — to say nothing of state boundaries and federal infiltration — has a long climb ahead.

During the meeting, District 2 Supervisor Don Saylor quoted Winston Churchill, who likely wouldn't believe his words entered talks of legal weed.

"This is not the end," Saylor said. "It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is the end of the beginning."

The last Board of Supervisors meeting in 2017 left Yolo with a cultivation quandary: general tax or development agreements?

Staff's recommendation on Tuesday: why not both?

Supervisors discussed a general tax — which requires 4/5 approval from supervisors and the majority of the public vote — for most of 2017, attaching the measure to a "poison pill," meaning if the tax didn't pass on the June 2018 ballot, cannabis would be effectively snipped from the county.

That last December meeting brought up development agreements, in which growers could opt for a long-term contract with the county that would also pass through appropriate environmental inspections and public consideration. The idea piqued the interest of many who wanted some sort of cemented agreement between growers and the county that showed investment in the industry's future.

To help outline an "integrated policy" that would allow for both options, the county hired on Land Use consultant Heidi Tschudin, who likened the cannabis industry to the county's interaction with gravel miners in past years.

Tschudin explained that a development agreement between Yolo County and gravel miners operating near the Capay Valley and Esparto dug up something of a happy ending to "gravel wars" in past decades. The county had "net gains" by allowing a limited amount of gravel mining, as those companies kept up parks and roadways near their mining sites.

She went on describing similarities between the mining and cannabis industries, but concluded that there may be too many growers for the county to hash out individual agreements.

County Administrator Patrick Blacklock added that the situations were similar, but the county may need to choose a different trajectory.

"You're at an important crossroads," he said. "But you've been here before."

Blacklock said development agreements were viable, but performing a CEQA review of every single grow site would be a nightmare akin to one the county just woke from.

"It would be event centers round two," he said, referring to Yolo's tangled agritourism policy.

Blacklock, Tschudin and County Council Phil Pogledich all implied the same idea: development agreements — or DAs — for a select few, taxes for all.

As now written up, the general tax would call for a four percent cut of growers' gross tax receipts. Through DAs, growers with long-term investments like state-of-the-art greenhouses could opt to provide more taxes or mitigation efforts in exchange for a solidified future.

Agricultural Commissioner John Young said DAs would be less apt for outdoor grows, as they are less invested in the property and cannot mitigate effects like odor.

Based on formal comments, it appeared that growers favored this possible start to future policy.

"This is a friendlier setting," said Anthony Vasquez, an advocate of Yolo Cannabis Coalition. He said "we'll get a lot done" in a less formal discussion of the industry.

Dispensary owner Kimberly Cargile, who lives in Woodland and runs A Therapeutic Alternative in Sacramento, said it was fair to start at four percent. Supervisors suggested the tax grow to five percent later; in the future, the tax rate could slide between one and 15 percent, but would only move a maximum of two percent each year.

She said the implementation should resemble first time cannabis users.

"It's like what I tell my patients," she said. "Start low and go slow."

SHIFTING SOIL

Regardless of local discussions, the cannabis industry isn't exactly rooted. Zooming out, the state can still shrink or expand the boundaries of cannabis law, and that shift could jilt aspiring growers, according to Young.

That's to say nothing of the federal government, which has suddenly shot daggers at California where blind eyes were once turned.

District 3 Supervisor Matt Rexroad suggested that Yolo County should at this point distinguish policy between medical and recreational cannabis, as they will soon represent two different markets. Chair Oscar Villegas said that at this point, "the juice" of that decision "would not be worth the squeeze."

Granted, the Feds warned of cannabis crackdown last week, but also reported they would leave medical cannabis alone.

The industry's unsure future in California has many looking at the walls for writing.

Young said he estimated that only 20 of Yolo's 72 permitted grows would survive the years to come, given that uncertainty.

Cannabis advocate Jackie McGowan agreed, putting her own ballpark figure at "no more than half."

The cannabis market itself marks an entirely different concern for growers, who may or may not be able to keep up with demand while also working through legal channels and competing with the black market. On a local level, the market could flood and force operations with shallow purses to bottom out their savings and give up.

With this "raw deal" in mind, supervisors voted 4-1 to roll on, with Rexroad opposed to the tax measure. Staff will continue to pursue both the tax measure and the option of development agreements, while also making way for the Land Use process slated to take shape in March.