

## MARIJUANA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

the question as well in a future article. Fortunately, North Carolina has the benefit of learning from the experiences of other states that have pursued legalization for either medical or recreational purposes. What are some of those lessons?

Unfortunately, many of us do not really know what is going on “out there” in the states that have voted to legalize. Unless you have researched the issue on your own or traveled to one of those ten states (especially to a city like Denver, Seattle, or Las Vegas, the thriving hubs of this new cannabis economy) it is difficult to visualize what legalization looks and feels like. We intend to share some of our research on that new reality. In addition, you probably have not paid close attention to the business side of this issue. We will try to bring some clarity to the considerable economic aspects of legalization in this series. Economic factors such as jobs, entrepreneurial opportunities, property values, and tax revenues cannot be separated from the arguments for and against the legalization of cannabis.

Let's start with the big picture of law and politics in the United States at the federal level. Despite the legalization wave sweeping through our nation's laboratories of democracy, growing or possessing marijuana is still illegal according to federal law, which classifies cannabis as a Schedule I addictive drug with “no currently accepted medical use.” In other words, the current cannabis laws are contradictory at the state and federal levels. While this contradiction between state and federal law was largely overlooked by Obama Attorneys General Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch, Trump AG Jeff Sessions, who took over the job in February 2017, clearly signaled his opposition to legalized cannabis on several occasions. Sessions' departure as AG in November 2018 (remarkably, cannabis stocks shot up nearly ten percent within minutes of Sessions' resignation) and the recent confirmation of Trump's new appointee, William Barr, leaves the question of federal policy on hold for the moment. Nevertheless, the Trump administration's harsh tone on cannabis legalization has so far not produced much discernible change in the relationship between the federal government and the states that legalized medical and/or recreational marijuana. Lots of noise, in other words, but little action. A situation that may be due in part to the promise in early 2018 by Colorado Senator Cory Gardner (R) to stop the further confirmation of Justice Department nominees in the



US Senate if the DOJ under Sessions continued to harm the Colorado and US cannabis economy.

When it comes to political action, the question of cannabis legalization at the federal level lags far behind the majority of the states. Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey, recently declared Democratic candidate for president in 2020, introduced the Marijuana Justice Act (MJA) in 2017. Considered by legalization advocates at the time to be “the single most far-reaching marijuana bill that's ever been filed in either chamber of Congress,” Booker's bill would legalize cannabis at the federal level by removing it from the Schedule I list (i.e. “descheduling” it). In addition, it would create additional financial incentives for more states to pursue legalization while also addressing racial disparities in drug-related incarceration. At the core of the MJA is the notion that the criminal prosecution of cannabis possession has taken a terrible toll on urban communities of color, where the rate of convictions and the harshness of sentences have been disproportionately aggressive for decades. To address that problem the bill would create a Community Reinvestment Fund aimed at rebuilding communities ravaged by the War on Drugs.

Given the Republican Party's control of the Senate, however, Booker's bill has not been brought to the floor, although six Democratic senators (including presidential aspirants Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, and Kirsten Gillibrand) have signed on to it as co-sponsors. In the House, now under Democratic control, Representative Barbara Lee of California has sponsored the MJA. Forty-three of her fellow Democrats have signed on as co-sponsors, and that number is likely to grow in 2019.

Will that be enough to get the legalization ball rolling in Washington? That remains to be seen, but legalization advocates are encouraged by the electoral defeat in 2018 of Texas Representative Pete Sessions who, as chair of the House Rules Committee since 2013, effectively blocked any cannabis reform bills in that chamber. Massachusetts Democrat Jim McGovern now chairs that committee.

Also worth noting with regard to congressional action is the Strengthening the Tenth Amendment through Entrusting States (STATES) Act, introduced in the Senate by Elizabeth Warren (D) with bi-partisan support in 2018. The bill, co-sponsored by Colorado Senator Cory Gardner (R) and inspired by former AG Sessions's threat to go after the finances of the legalized cannabis industry, would change existing law by making it impossible for federal officials to prosecute individuals for

cannabis crimes in states that voted to legalize. In other words, the STATES Act would protect the emerging cannabis industry (especially its banking practices) from federal intervention. Such a move would assure both cannabis consumers and investors. Currently sitting in the Senate and House Judiciary committees, the bill is likely to get a vote in both chambers this year.

Most recently, in early 2019 Representative Earl Blumenauer and Senator Ron Wyden, both of Oregon, introduced companion legislation in both chambers of Congress to remove cannabis from the list of Schedule I drugs under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, effectively legalizing cannabis products across the country. Known popularly as the 420 bills (because of the significance of that number in the cannabis sub-culture), Blumenauer and Wyden would also set up things like a federal excise tax on cannabis and a permitting process for businesses involved in the cannabis industry. The basic idea is to get the federal government out of the way of this emerging industry in states like Oregon, which legalized recreational cannabis in 2015. As Blumenauer and Wyden wrote in their executive summary of the bills, “it is an undeniable fact that the legal marijuana industry is an economic driver in the United States,” expected to “grow to \$26 billion by 2025.” Blumenauer believes that “the most pro-cannabis Congress in American history” will pass the 420 legislation, but it's still too early to tell how these bills will fare in this session. It's also unclear how the various pieces of legislation proposed in recent years will ultimately come together.

Finally, we would be remiss if we said nothing about the 2018 US Farm Bill passed by a Republican-controlled Congress and signed by Trump, which lifted restrictions on the growing of industrial hemp by licensed farmers, including many in NC. That reform has already led to the creation of many new North Carolina businesses. GOP support for such a reform might indicate the beginning of a broader shift in attitudes toward the economic opportunities afforded by legalization.

In sum, things are changing rapidly on the cannabis legalization front. The legalization movement is starting to get organized in NC. Legislative debate appears to be imminent in the General Assembly. Attitudes, even among some conservatives, are shifting. Farmers looking to replace tobacco, veterans seeking treatment for PTSD and other chronic illnesses, and urban communities blighted by decades of aggressive policing might make for a potent political coalition. In our next article in this series, we delve more deeply into the public opinion data, as well as the economics of cannabis legalization.

*James A. Wood is Chair of the Board of Advisers, Sustainable Prosperity Inc., Pittsboro. Randy Voller, is President and Chair of the Board of Directors, Sustainable Prosperity Inc., Pittsboro. He is also the Publisher of Chatham County Line.*

## Local on Main: Farm and Arts Dinner, May 19

Pittsboro's creative culture is a way of life. Culinary artistry, visual and performing artistry and our appreciation for small family farms draw visitors who become neighbors. In recognition of the good life we enjoy here, Main Street Pittsboro invites you to join friends and neighbors for dinner under the sky at a table in the center of Hillsboro Street.

We'll celebrate the skills of local farmers, chefs, and artists in this fundraiser to help us continue our mission of revitalizing our historic downtown district. Mark your calendars and watch [MainStreetPittsboro.com](http://MainStreetPittsboro.com) for tickets and more information.



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## OPINION

### The displacement crisis

by Barry Reece

Immediately after the end of the Vietnam war in April of 1975, large numbers of Vietnamese began fleeing to nearby countries. Over the next 20 years more than two million Vietnamese left the nation of their birth to start new lives in foreign lands. Communists also took over in Cambodia and Laos, engendering a steady flow of refugees fleeing those countries. The term “boat people” was used to describe refugees who fled by sea. Many refugees failed to survive the passage, facing danger from pirates, over-crowded boats, or storms.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq provides an example of the dire consequences of war. The number of Iraqis displaced by war has been estimated at over five million men, women and children. Many Iraq citizens became refugees after migrating to Jordan and Syria. Others stayed in Iraq hoping to find food and shelter. Nearly all of the displaced Iraqis cite violence as the reason for leaving their homes. Many feared they would become victims of ethnic or sectarian cleansing.

Syria has been involved in a civil war since 2011. Conflict broke out after a forceful crackdown on peaceful protests against the government of Bashar al-Assad. The consequences are tragic for civilians who must cope with a collapsed infrastructure and the daily threat of violence. The number of Syrians who have fled the country has risen to four million during the past few years.

We need more political and military leaders who understand the consequences of the displacement crisis.

*Dr. Barry L. Reece is a US Army veteran and active member of Veterans For Peace*

### To the Editor:

It might be tongue-in-cheek, but the advice in Dr. Lynn Veach Sadler's February History column offered by Charles Lazarus, that tigers do not eat people, is mistaken and needs to be corrected.

When humans encroach on wild animal habitat with deforestation, tigers will attack. Tigers in the wild often gorge themselves on a hundred pounds of meat in a sitting. Tigers are obligate carnivores and only eat meat. They are fairly opportunistic if hungry. Sounds like a human would make a nice feast!

At Carolina Tiger Rescue, we have an \$80,000 food budget per year for our 45 wild cats, which adds up to a lot of meat. Since 1990, there have been 26 human deaths and 264 maulings by big cats in captivity in the US.

In NC, there is no legislation preventing your neighbor from owning a big cat... next to a school... next to your kids' playhouse.

Thanks for humoring us while we educate the community about the growing issues of human and tiger interactions.

— Michelle Meyers, Communications Director, Carolina Tiger Rescue



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