



Connecticut Towns Take Different Approaches to Allowing Marijuana Businesses

BY BRENDAN CROWLEY · OCTOBER 4, 2021 · MARIJUANA

As many Connecticut towns take a wait-and-see approach to recreational marijuana — passing a moratorium to allow 6 months to a year to evaluate the situation — other towns are moving more quickly in an effort to provide clarity and allow preparations for potential applicants to enter the state lottery for growing and retail licenses next year.

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Laurie Zrenda, the former owner of the medical marijuana dispensary [Thames Valley Relief](#) in Uncasville, has taken a pro-active approach in hopes of securing a state permit to operate a recreational marijuana dispensary in her hometown of East Lyme.

Zrenda said she bought a property on Colton Road — just south of Interstate 95 at exit 71 — a few months ago. Zredna said she was careful to find a spot that wasn't in a residential area, and that wouldn't contribute to the notorious traffic around exits 74 and 75.

Zrenda also applied to allow marijuana dispensaries by special permit in East Lyme's light industrial zones — a proposal that gained the approval of the East Lyme Planning Commission, and could be considered by the town's Zoning Commission as early as its [meeting this Thursday](#) evening.

“East Lyme is where I live. I grew up here,” Zrenda said. “I love the idea of the town having 3 percent of the revenues, and it would be nice if I could work close to home.”

The State of Connecticut is also establishing a very different system for awarding recreational dispensary permits than it did for medical marijuana. For medical sales, Zrenda said, every application was scored based on a rubric, and the applications with the highest scores were awarded permits.

For recreational marijuana, the state will use two separate lottery systems to award permits — including a lottery for “social equity applicants” who will be awarded half of the available permits.

To qualify for the social equity lottery, a business must be at least 65-percent owned by someone who has lived in an area [disproportionately impacted](#) by marijuana-related arrests. In eastern Connecticut, those areas are centered in New London, Norwich and Willimantic.

Zrenda said she is unsure whether her pro-active approach toward zoning will help her qualify for a permit in the new lottery system,

but she said she wanted to get as much “leg work” as she could done ahead of time in case it does help.

“Hopefully we get picked in the lottery, but I want to have everything set so we can move quickly,” Zrenda said. “If I don’t get the license, I could rent it to someone who does, if I get the zoning.”

Thus far, it has been more common for town governments across the region to take the lead on marijuana than for parties like Zrenda to apply for a change of zoning.

Those municipal efforts have split into three main categories: allowing and regulating the new marijuana businesses, prohibiting them, or establishing a moratorium to give themselves more time to evaluate what they want to do.

Between the neighboring towns of Middletown, Middlefield and Durham, each town has taken a different approach towards marijuana.

Middletown already moved in August to [implement zoning rules](#) for marijuana “micro-cultivation” and retail sales. Durham’s Planning and Zoning Commission instituted a six-month moratorium on marijuana establishments in August — a popular move among smaller towns to buy more time to decide how to deal with the new industry. While Middlefield is turning the issue over to the public with a referendum on whether to prohibit marijuana businesses — a question Stonington residents will also vote on tomorrow.

Moratorium buys time to think carefully

Durham First Selectwoman Laura Francis said the moratorium was meant to give Durham more time to consider “what’s right for our community.” It’s a question the Board of Selectman is considering, as well.

The Board of Selectmen is holding a public hearing to gather comments from local residents, and then will decide whether to



pursue an ordinance or leave regulation of the industry to the town's Planning and Zoning Commission, Francis said.

"Basically it boils down to, do we keep it in the hands of the nine-member board of the Planning and Zoning Commission, or do we have a process that is more inclusive and requires approval by a wider part of the community," Francis said.

The Town of Groton is considering at a similar approach, Town Planner Jon Reiner said, but instead of instituting a temporary moratorium, the town's Planning and Zoning Commission will hold a public hearing on Oct. 12 to consider a regulation prohibiting marijuana establishments.

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Reiner said the intent isn't actually to prohibit the businesses, but is being considered "out of an abundance of caution" to ensure they have enough time to review how they want to regulate the industry. If approved by the commission, the regulations would effectively function as a moratorium, he said.

"They want to take their time to regulate marijuana use in town, and not necessarily prohibit it," Reiner said. "But there's not a lot of great examples out there yet for regulation, so they want to take their time in putting one together."

Others hope quick action helps applicants



Middletown Planning and Zoning Chair Steven DeVoto said the commission went ahead with zoning for marijuana rather than instituting a moratorium because they felt the city should get out in front of the new industry. Having regulations in place gives potential applicants and property owners more certainty, knowing whether growing or retail would be allowed on their property.

“I do feel it gives us a leg up,” DeVoto said in a recent interview with CT Examiner. “If businesses are looking to a town where there is a moratorium, they can’t be sure what the regulations will be in the future, while we’ve made our regulations clear and open.”

As a commercial center for the region, drawing in business from across Middlesex County, DeVoto said he thought Middletown was well-suited to host a marijuana retailer. Middletown also has a lot of space available for growing facilities, which the regulations currently allow in industrial zones, he said.

Downtown Middletown, including the North End and South Farms, are considered “disproportionately impacted” by marijuana arrests. Applicants from those areas would qualify for the social equity lottery, potentially making Middletown a more likely location for a dispensary than other towns in the area.

“We try in Middletown to get businesses going, particularly small and locally-owned businesses, which we think are going to be good for our city,” DeVoto said. “We felt that the cannabis industry is the kind of business that would be small, locally owned, and a benefit to the city — and we try to make things easier for the kinds of businesses that we want to have in our city.”

Stonington First Selectman Danielle Chesebrough is preparing for a referendum on Tuesday where residents will vote whether to allow marijuana businesses in town. She said the town’s Planning and Zoning Commission and Board of Selectmen didn’t think it was right to make such a big decision without having campaigned on the issue or having a sense of how residents felt about the topic.

Tuesday's referendum asks whether voters wish to prohibit marijuana growing and retail in town — a “yes” vote is a vote against those businesses, and a “no” vote is a vote in favor of allowing them.

Chesebrough said that framing was due to a legal opinion that those businesses would be allowed unless the town specifically prohibited them — so if the question was posed as “do you want to allow marijuana growing and retail in town” and residents voted “no,” those uses would still be allowed without further action by the town.

She said the question was being put to voters now, because the vote will line up with another scheduled [referendum on a tax abatement](#) for a proposed affordable housing project in Pawcatuck. She said they also didn't want to hold off on the vote in case there are businesses that do want to look into setting up in Stonington, if voters allow it.

Chesebrough said the town has not yet received inquiries from anyone interested in setting up either marijuana growing or retail in Stonington. But she said she thinks there could be interest considering Stonington's position along I-95, and next to the border with Rhode Island, where recreational marijuana sales are still prohibited.

“We haven't had anyone with interest, but I think there would be off of exit 92 [on I-95] where there is a four-lane road that could potentially handle the traffic some Massachusetts towns have seen,” Chesebrough said. “They would have to go through Planning and Zoning and look at traffic flow, and where is the right zone, and all those types of things, but it does seem like there could be potential interest in certain areas of town.”

While Chesebrough said she believes residents should decide whether marijuana growing or sales are allowed in Stonington, but she personally believes there is a lot of upside for the town if it is allowed.



“The state has already passed it and made it legal, if one of our neighboring towns potentially has one and Stonington doesn’t have one, we’re just foregoing the tax revenue that could be coming in,” Chesebrough said.

While Chesebrough said she has not seen negative impacts in Massachusetts — other than increased traffic — there are residents who have shared genuine concerns about the potential impact these businesses could have on the community, and she said that if it were approved, the town would explore using some of the tax revenue for educational campaigns and substance abuse treatment.

