



County of Santa Cruz

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BOARD TAKES STEPS TO LICENSE CANNABIS CULTIVATION

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday took historic steps to begin the process of licensing medical cannabis suppliers within County jurisdiction, subject to certain limitations to protect the environment and neighborhood vitality.

Voting unanimously, the Board directed County Counsel to draft an ordinance that establishes a licensing regime for the commercial cultivation of cannabis within limited areas of the County, in compliance with California's Medical Marijuana Regulation and Safety Act and pending environmental review. The Board also directed the County Administrative Office to set up an interim registration system for existing growers pursuant to certain conditions.

"We want to protect Santa Cruz County's quality of life and core values while addressing the community's clear desire to maintain access to medical cannabis. We believe this proposal fits the needs of small, local growers while making sure neighborhoods and open spaces aren't overwhelmed by commercial operators," Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors Chair Bruce McPherson said.

"We've threaded the needle to meet the needs of an emerging area of land use and to protect the issues our county cares about: neighborhoods, the environment and economic development," Supervisor John Leopold said.

The proposal prohibits commercial cultivation in solely residential areas of the County, while continuing to allow personal cultivation of medical cannabis. In rural areas, the canopy size of commercial grows would be limited by parcel size and subject to property boundary, stream and right-of-way setbacks, as well as other requirements.



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“Santa Cruz County has a long tradition of protecting the environment and neighborhoods,” Supervisor Ryan Coonerty said. “This is no different, but we are willing to allow commercial agricultural activity in appropriate places.”

In addition, the Board set limits on cannabis cultivation in and near the Coastal Zone, allowing it only on parcels designated for agricultural use. The Board also agreed to allow commercial cultivation within existing greenhouse and warehouse sites located in coastal areas, up to a cumulative total of 100,000 square feet.

The Board directed County staff to study the impact of allowing cultivation in timber harvest zones and return with recommendations, and directed local cultivators to create a “compassionate use” system for distributing low- or no-cost cannabis to economically disadvantaged residents. In addition, voters are likely to be asked to revisit the County’s cannabis business tax to allow for additional regulatory and enforcement activities.

The registration system is expected to be in place sometime this summer. The licensing ordinance must pass through environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), as well as review by citizen-led advisory commissions, before returning to the Board for full consideration.

“When all is said and done, this is one of the largest land use changes that Santa Cruz County has ever undertaken, and there will be undeniable impacts on our environment,” Supervisor Zach Friend said. “We need a thorough and comprehensive environmental review to ensure all impacts are analyzed.”

Tuesday’s action was based on valuable input from the Cannabis Cultivation Choices Committee (C4), a County-established advisory group comprised of experts in cultivation, land use, environmental regulations and more.

The County wishes to thank the C4 committee and moderator Eric Olsen for their excellent service to the residents of Santa Cruz County.