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## Marijuana legalization supported at forum

State representatives  
were on the panel

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A planned open forum for discussing marijuana policy in the state of Missouri eventually turned into a pep rally of sorts for its legalization Thursday night at the Columbia Public Library.

"Does it make sense to do it now?" Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, wondered aloud about advocating legalizing marijuana. He said he wanted to see the organizational support necessary to pass a measure.

To that, a standing room only crowd at the Columbia Public Library cheered and applauded.

The panel discussion was led by local attorney and advocate Dan Viets. Two members of the Missouri House of Representatives — Kelly and Rep. Rory Ellinger, D-University City — attended. Also in attendance was Bob Roper, a self-proclaimed libertarian conservative columnist for the Columbia Daily Tribune and Hank Waters, the publisher of the Tribune.

The crowd argued in favor of

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## Planning commission

# Kelly undecided whether to seek ballot measure for legalization

FORUM from page 1A

legalization based on medical reasons, what they saw as benefits to ridding society of illegal marijuana trade, and an unjust history of federal prohibition.

Some, like Roper, said they saw reforming marijuana laws as an opportunity to restrict the reach of government.

At least one person in the crowd was against marijuana reform.

"I'm not convinced that it won't become more widespread, especially among young people," Kelly Quick said after the forum. "There's no way of knowing how many people would be using."

Quick said that if a measure were passed, medical marijuana should be controlled like prescription drugs.

The discussion among organizers and the state representatives did not focus much on the philosophical debate. Instead, they tried to talk strategy throughout the forum.

Ellinger noted progress the legislature has made recently to advance marijuana legislation. This year, on the last day of the legislative session, the overwhelmingly Republican legislature held a hearing on Ellinger's decriminalization bill.

"It's extremely important that we reach across the table and that we don't call names," Ellinger said. "We must have Republican sponsorship no matter what we come up with. It's very important."

Ellinger said this session he would follow Kelly's lead on marijuana legislation. After the forum, Kelly remained undecided on whether to seek a ballot initiative or forge a path through the legislature.

Kelly also said he didn't know whether to introduce a bill to authorize medical marijuana, introduce one to decriminalize it, or introduce one to fully legalize the drug.

## Other marijuana policies

**St. Louis:** The city's new ordinance, signed this spring by Mayor Francis Slay, gives police the option of directing cases to municipal court, setting a limit of \$500 in fines for carrying less than 35 grams, and not leading to arrest.

**Columbia:** Columbia passed a similar ordinance in 2004, making the first offense for carrying less than 35 grams of marijuana a municipal offense, limiting fines to \$250 and ridding offenders of the possibility of being imprisoned.

**Springfield:** The city has been taken to court over its handling of a petition seeking to reduce marijuana penalties. In 2012, advocates presented a petition to the City Council. The city had two options, according to the suit: to pass the initiative outright or to vote it down, automatically sending it to voters. Instead, they passed the proposal, then quickly repealed the new ordinance, circumventing a public vote, the suit contends.

**Arkansas:** After a lengthy petition drive, medical marijuana advocates were able to place the issue on the 2012 ballot. The measure narrowly lost, with 51 percent of voters against the measure. Another ballot initiative is in the works for the November 2014 election.

**Illinois:** Illinois became the first state bordering Missouri to have a medical marijuana bill signed into law. In August, Gov. Pat Quinn signed the bill, supporting the law on compassionate grounds as well as its tight restrictions. The law takes effect in January.

Sources: St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The Riverfront Times, CNN, The Associated Press

The difference between decriminalization and legalization is that decriminalization still carries a penalty of a fine but doesn't result in jail time.

He remained skeptical that a ballot initiative would be the best way to move forward because of concerns about any initiative's language.

"I'd rather do it through the legislature because if you do a ballot initiative, they invariably get it wrong. Ballot initiatives get it wrong 100 percent of the time, even the ones I support," Kelly said.

He also remained skeptical that, despite the cheering at the forum, there was enough organizational sup-

port to pass a measure.

"I know that there are lots of people in Columbia, Mo., that support legalization," Kelly said. "The question I have is, is there a sufficient organizational capacity to put together a campaign?"

Amber Iris Langston of the group Show-Me Cannabis Regulation said she would prefer a ballot initiative over going through the legislature.

She also floated the idea of the legislature passing a bill to put the measure on the ballot for voters.

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