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Sept. 14, 2014. John Chambers. *Making marijuana more accessible will hurt young people, increase the addition rate – Oregon Legalized Marijuana Initiative Measure 91* (Guest Opinion)

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JOHN CHAMBERS

“Marijuana should be regulated like alcohol” is the battle-cry for the backers of Oregon’s Measure 91, the “Control, Regulation, and Taxation of Marijuana and Industrial Hemp Act of 2014.”

Measure 91, similar to the Colorado Marijuana Act of 2012, touts that it will eliminate the problems of prohibition by establishing a comprehensive regulatory framework that prevents innocent citizens from being imprisoned for marijuana use, prevents the distribution of marijuana to children, eliminates the black market, and stops the diversion of marijuana from Oregon to other states.

First, alcohol, regulated alcohol mind you, is the top drug of choice by those high school kids who do drugs (most don’t). Marijuana is a distant second. Colorado has seen an increase in high school students using marijuana with a 32 percent increase in drug-related suspensions. Young people think that because it is legal, it is safe. Do we want really more children smoking dope?

Second, Coloradans were promised \$132 million annual income from marijuana taxes. As of June 30, 2014, half the year gone, revenue has been only \$15 million and regulatory costs have come out of the state’s General Fund. According to Barbara Brohl of the Colorado Department of Revenue, regarding the state’s earlier medical marijuana regulatory scheme, “The funding model just didn’t work, and as a result, the division wasn’t able to perform the regulatory and oversight functions it was created to do.” The cost of regulation has been unexpectedly high but the state has not been able to regulate it as promised. Individual cities that have taxed it are also finding they cannot control it, don’t know how many providers are operating, and are collecting precious little in taxes.

The “comprehensive regulatory framework” envisioned in Oregon’s Measure 91 is similar to Colorado’s. The levels of allowed pot are similar: less home possession, more edibles, but fewer plants. Measure 91’s fees and taxes are lower.

Third, marijuana advocates cite the “problems of prohibition” as (a) thousands of otherwise innocent citizens imprisoned for merely wanting to get high on marijuana, and (b) the fact that prohibition has failed. The truth of “(a)” is that virtually all those in prison on “drug charges” are

incarcerated for serious felonies — burglary, assault, etc. — they committed while they were high on marijuana. Oregon does not put people in prison for smoking a joint. The failure of “(b)” is that yes, dope is more prevalent, but murders still happen, too. Do we throw up our hands in despair and allow mass murders because “they are going to do it anyway?”

Prohibitions will continue even if Measure 91 is approved. Prohibitions regarding children, diversion to other states, and smoking in public. While the Colorado law prohibits public smoking of dope, public displays are omnipresent and virtually unenforceable. But if Coloradans got serious about their law, citizens could conceivably be jailed for smoking a joint. And what happens when it is taxed and your marijuana doesn't have the tax stamp on it?

Fourth, Measure 91, like the Colorado act and every act in every state, recognizes that children should not be allowed this drug, just like alcohol. In Colorado, children are picking up dope cookies and being rushed to the hospital. Marijuana-related exposures for children 5 and under, on average, have increased by 268 percent from 2006-09 to 2010-13. Even veterinarians have noticed a significant rise in the number of pets brought in for marijuana overdoses. It is well-known that the more accessible a drug is the more likely kids will be tempted to try it. Fifth, elimination of the black market is another promise Measure 91 cannot keep. Colorado has a thriving market of those who want to avoid the tax. Colorado marijuana, since the advent of medical marijuana in 2008, captured in other states has nearly doubled. Weed from Oregon has been found as far away as Florida. Do we really think that by making pot more accessible, Oregon weed will become pristine?

The real question is: Do Oregon voters want to make pot more accessible and under the guise of regulating it like alcohol? If so, we can expect a rise in youth use and addiction rates. Legalizing a drug makes it more accessible and increases new markets for consumption. It has happened in Colorado.

Colorado's social experiment with pot is not for Oregon. Vote NO on Measure 91.

John Chambers is a community volunteer, a member of the Substance Abuse Community Action Team, and coordinates the Truth about Drugs campaign for Josephine County. His opinion is solely his own.