

# Cannabis consumption lounges on horizon in N.J.

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

TRENTON — In Colorado, they call them cannabis consumption lounges and New Jersey may soon permit areas where likeminded persons can partake of marijuana in a group setting with features such as big-screen TVs, music and free rolling papers.

The state Cannabis Regulatory Commission (CRC) approved rules for cannabis consumption areas Jan. 17 that would allow such an area to be attached to a class five retailer subject to CRC and municipal approval.

The sale of tobacco products, alcohol and food would be prohibited in consumption areas.

Patrons would be required to present photo identification to show proof of age — 21 years or older.

Medical cannabis patients

would be allowed to bring their own cannabis items from other legal retailers.

Patrons would be allowed to consume food or have food delivered, if allowed by the business and municipality.

CRC Chief Counsel Chris Riggs said an initial or renewal fee of \$1,000 would be levied for a cannabis consumption area for microbusinesses and \$5,000 for a standard business. CRC approved a resolution that will be followed by legal advertisement in the New Jersey Register this month.

The commission will release information on how to apply for a consumption area next month, CRC Executive Director Jeff Brown said.

Brown said 2,461 license applications have been received by the commission with 1,695 approved and 161 applications under review in the Office of

Licensing; 311 applications pending resubmission following correction of an error and 187 applications under review in the Office of Compliance and Investigations.

He said CRC was taking just under 90 days to approve conditional licenses and about six months for annual licenses.

"We eclipsed 90 dispensaries in total between medicinal and recreational and we're now covering 20 out of 21 counties in the state of New Jersey," he said. "One of the things that we're going to see in 2024 is a lot more openings from cultivators, manufacturers, these are companies that take longer to get open just because of the complexity of the construction of the business."

Brown said overall, the CRC has approved 1,322 conditional licenses, 233 conditional-to-annual conversions, 141 annual

licenses which allow full operation and 71 expanded alternative care centers (ATCs).

During the meeting, the CRC approved 22 conditional applications, 36 conditional-to-annual licenses and one expanded ATC. Of the 22 conditional licenses, seven were for cultivators, two for manufacturers, two wholesalers, one distributor, nine retailers and one delivery service.

A conditional license is a provisional license pursuant to an abbreviated application process that gives applicants more time to get property or municipal approval. It does not allow the business to operate. An annual license allows a cannabis business to operate following state inspections of the property.

As of Jan. 16, the medicinal cannabis program had 88,670 patients, 5,277 caregivers and 1,525 doctors.

Brown noted the CRC website offers a "find a licensed dispensary page" at nj.gov/cannabis.

CRC Director Wesley McWhite said of 374 annual licenses awarded, 65, or 17%, were social equity businesses and 266 licenses, or 71% awarded, were for diversely owned businesses.

He said majority-owned Black, Asian and Hispanic and disabled veteran-owned business that were not yet operational stated they were experiencing local planning and zoning board issues, administrative turnover at the local level, funding problems and keeping their investors educated about the changes in the market, and when they will be able to open.

He said there is a shortage of properties, rising construction costs due to inflation and "cannabis stigma."

## Homelessness

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can't find places to rent for its clients, it is moving in the direction of providing credit and housing counseling and possibly having clients apply for USDA loans to become homeowners, Sullivan said.

Harvey Roach, chairman of the organization's Leadership Committee, hosted the session. He said his committee last month reached out to the 16 municipalities in the county asking for their

number of affordable housing units.

Avalon, Cape May Point, Dennis Township, Sea Isle City, West Cape May, Wildwood and Wildwood Crest all stated they had zero affordable housing units, Roach said, adding that Lower Township, Upper Township, Woodbine and Stone Harbor did not respond to the committee.

Cape May stated it has 204 affordable housing units including Victorian Towers, Middle Township has 134 units, North Wild-

wood has 105 units, Ocean City has 42 units with "109 units on the drawing board," and West Wildwood has 306 units, for a total of 791 units, he said.

"This is something you that you hear in all conversations about home ownership, 'My kids can't afford to buy a house where they grew up,'" Roach said. "The cost and the shortage of affordable housing units impacts not only those who grew up here looking to purchase or rent a home but our veteran population, those with disabilities or special needs, our environment, and those who may want to downsize and remain in the community but not necessarily in a 55-plus or assisted living environment. And often overlooked but crucial in our economy, many people who make up the workforce in Cape May County cannot afford to live here."

He said an effort is under way in the Legislature to improve the affordable housing program in the state. Senate bill S-50, under the sponsorship of Sen. Troy Singleton and Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez, Democratic dep-

uty speaker of the Assembly, would replace the Council on Affordable Housing and increase the number of affordable housing units people of low- and moderate-income can afford.

According to Singleton, the state needs an additional 200,000 affordable housing units.

Roach said the homeless problem in Cape May County has "virtually exploded over the past few years." He said the county's seasonal economy contributes to homelessness as well as an increase in homelessness veterans.

"All these factors have combined to strain both the official infrastructure in a county with no overnight homeless shelter as well as the non-profit infrastructure that works diligently daily to assist the growing, often-misunderstood segment of our population," Roach said.

He said there other counties in the region work in partnership with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development and municipal governments to construct housing.

"According to a Cape May County official I spoke with last month, the county is restricted by HUD in using these funds for housing vouchers only," Roach said.

Middle Township has legislated that tents in the woods occupied by homeless persons are illegal, he said.

Former state Senate president Steve Sweeney said when he was growing up, it was customary for a person to dedicate 25 percent to 30 percent of their income to housing but now costs far exceed those percentages.

He said some towns are in denial of the need for affordable housing and

almost anyone could find themselves homeless.

"I just wish people would recognize that affordable housing is not an ugly word, it's not like 'there goes the neighborhood.' It's just people that aren't fortunate as others that want to have their kids go to good school systems, they want to move forward and live in quality neighborhoods," Sweeney said.

Jacqueline Jones, executive director of the Vineland Housing Authority, also contracted with public housing in Cape May, Ocean City and Buena through shared service agreements, said those in need of affordable housing may be families that did not have the same opportunities as others.

"They are just in a different situation. It doesn't mean they're bad people, it just means that they have different jobs and different incomes," she said.

Monthly rent for one person in a household in this county with a moderate income of \$53,678 at an affordable rate would be \$1,342 per month, while a person considered low income should have rent of \$838 and very low income with a rate of \$503, Jones said.

She said the category of extremely low income is seen in public housing, which involves a "deep subsidy." Section 8 housing uses a voucher, allowing residents to pay 30 percent of their income toward the rent, according to Jones.

"The issue here is there is only a certain number of these vouchers and almost every waiting list is closed," she said.

Jones said development of public housing from the federal government stopped in the 1980s. The newest type of de-

velopment is through tax credits, with developers financially backing the construction, she said.

Jones said Habitat for Humanity focuses on families that are earning 80 percent or less of the area's median income. She said the challenge is to find a family that fits that income category that can afford a mortgage, the property taxes and the homeowner's insurance.

The Branches director Tyler Keene said the organization serves breakfast and lunch and provides showers and personal care items and clothing for homeless persons, as well as operating a food pantry and a mobile grocery delivery program that serves families living in motels. He called Cape May County "incredibly under-resourced."

"A challenge right now is that when you have no overnight homeless shelter, no affordable housing, no adequate transitional housing, people who would be experiencing otherwise general poverty somewhere else are in crisis here," he said. "There is no safety net to fall back on."

"It's hard when you're first homeless and there's no place to go and that short term experience of crisis extends in Cape May County into chronic homelessness very easily and so that's what we are trying to course correct every single day," Keene continued.

He said 82 percent of The Branches' clients come from a 10-mile radius of their location in Rio Grande and it is neighbors who are suffering.

Keene said he worked for a large non-profit organization before moving back to this county and his current position is the most difficult job he has held. This county lacks social service programs available elsewhere in the state, he said.

"We need help, we are drowning," he said.

The Branches helped a 90-year-old couple that was experiencing homelessness for the first time and were living in their car, Keene said.

He said there is no legal place to sleep in this county for a homeless person.

"We are in need of all the help and support that we can possibly get," Keene said. "We are in need of our community understanding the problems here and that people experiencing homelessness in our county have no real likelihood for progression like in some other places."

Food insecurity for children in Cape May County exceeds Camden County at more than 17 percent.

"We have over 3,000 kids that are food-insecure in our county," he said. "Cape May County is so much more than the Cape Mays and the Avalons. There are so many people experiencing crisis here, it's going to take a village to help lift people up together."

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