

# BACKING LEGAL MARIJUANA

Recreational use should be OK, report will say

BY YANCEY ROY  
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Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's health commissioner said Monday his agency will soon issue a report recommending the legalization of recreational marijuana, possibly setting the stage for a dramatic policy shift for the governor.

Dr. Howard Zucker said the health department will release a long-awaited marijuana report in the coming days.

"We realized that the pros outweigh the cons and the report recommends a regulated, legal marijuana program be available to adults in the state of New York," Zucker said at a news conference in Brooklyn.

If the governor backs the report's recommendation, it would complete an extraordinary shift for the Democrat. It also would put him on the same page as Cynthia Nixon, the actress and activist who is chal-



Dr. Howard Zucker

lenging Cuomo for the Democratic nomination from the political left. It would align New York with a growing number of states that have legalized marijuana.

Another Cuomo election opponent, Republican Marc Molinaro, said the health department's recommendation was

more about Cuomo "sprinting to the left" in an election year than the issue's serious consideration.

When he took office in 2011, Cuomo initially opposed the legalization not only of recreational marijuana but also of medical marijuana. Pushed by state legislators, he negotiated a new medical marijuana program in 2014, but still opposed recreational marijuana, calling it a "gateway drug."

In January, Cuomo proposed that the state budget fund a study of potential legalization. Though the provision wasn't included in the budget adopted in March, Cuomo said in April the health department would conduct the research anyway, saying the "facts" had changed, noting the many other states that have decriminalized marijuana.

Meanwhile, Nixon on April 11 called for legalization of the recreational use of marijuana. She said it was a "social justice" issue and noted the disproportionate number of blacks and Latinos prosecuted for marijuana use compared with whites. She also said it could raise revenue for the state.

Zucker didn't disclose any

further details on what his agency would recommend, such as limits on businesses and tax rates. He didn't specify a minimum age, but said legalization would be only for "adults."

Asked for a rationale in the policy switch, Zucker likened it to research driving changes in medical policy. "This is no different than medicine," Zucker said. "We have new facts. We have new data."

Nor was it clear if, how and when the administration might follow through on Zucker's recommendation. The state Legislature is set to adjourn for the year Wednesday, meaning no meaningful action could likely occur until 2019, after this year's elections.

Cuomo's office limited its comments to saying it would "review the report when we receive it."

A Nixon spokeswoman said Zucker's announcement was being used to "distract" attention from opening arguments Monday in a public corruption trial that focuses on Cuomo's high-profile economic projects.

Nixon aide Lauren Hitt also said the policy shift comes too

late. "One year after calling marijuana a 'gateway drug,' it shouldn't have taken Cuomo eight years and #TheCynthiaEffect to understand the 'facts have changed,'" said Hitt, referring to a term activists have used to describe Cuomo's shifts to the left in this election year.

"Cynthia believes legalizing cannabis is not enough and we must also expunge people's records and create marijuana equity, setting aside half of its marijuana licenses for low-income residents who have been convicted of a marijuana-related crime or who live in communities disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs."

The Molinaro campaign questioned whether Zucker was providing political cover for Cuomo. It noted that Zucker previously was deployed by Cuomo to write a study that ultimately led the governor to banning — just after the 2014 election — hydraulic fracturing for natural gas.

"There are serious questions to be answered about marijuana," said Molinaro spokeswoman Katy Delgado. "They should be answered by serious people without a political agenda."

## Isles ask Nassau IDA for \$400G tax break

BY JIM BAUMBACH  
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The Islanders are requesting a \$400,000 sales tax break from the Nassau County Industrial Development Agency on their financial contribution to the \$8.7 million renovation of NYCB Live's Nassau Coliseum.

The team is seeking to facilitate its temporary return to its former home arena in Uniondale.

The Islanders are contributing \$2.7 million in addition to a state grant for \$6 million to renovate the county-owned arena to bring it into National Hockey League compliance. The Islanders are seeking the sales tax exemption on their purchase of construction materials, equipment and other supplies needed to complete the renovation project.

The Islanders are scheduled to play 60 games at the Coliseum



The Islanders are to play 60 games at NYCB Live's Nassau Coliseum, seen here in 2017.

over the next three seasons while they await a new arena at Belmont Park. They will play the remainder of their games at Brooklyn's Barclays Center, their home since 2015.

Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment, which operates both the Coliseum and Barclays Center, submitted paperwork to the IDA

on the Islanders' behalf. Newsday obtained a copy of the 56-page application under the Freedom of Information Law.

Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment, which is orchestrating the renovation, will make a presentation at the IDA meeting Tuesday before the group votes.

"We're happy that the Islanders are planning to come home and will play games at the Coliseum," IDA chairman Richard Kessel said. "We look forward to the presentation, and we will evaluate their application closely because taxpayer money is involved."

The Islanders declined to

comment.

The Coliseum reopened a year ago following an 18-month, \$180 million renovation by Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment during which the seating capacity for hockey games was reduced to 13,900 from more than 16,000.

This latest renovation, set to begin this month, includes installation of video-cable infrastructure, an upgrade of ice rink equipment and renovation of the locker room to be used by the Islanders. The application projects the county will receive "close to \$2 million annually" from various tax revenues generated by Islanders games at the Coliseum.

Meanwhile, the Islanders' arena project at Belmont remains in the environmental review stage, with construction slated to begin as early as next spring.

With James T. Madore