

★ Gov makes pot pitch

Cuomo calls for legalization, but some say not so fast

BY MICHAEL GORMLEY
michael.gormley@newsday.com

ALBANY — Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo on Tuesday propelled the effort to legalize recreational use of marijuana by including it in his budget address, but serious discussions of how he intends to make it work are still ahead as the medical community and some key legislators want more study of health and safety issues.

Cuomo proposed to make 21 the legal age to consume marijuana, the same as he has proposed for tobacco use. The governor said legalizing marijuana would bring in \$300 million in state revenue and “create the

good union jobs that we need.”

His aides later explained that it would still be illegal to grow marijuana at home for recreational use, although the law would allow home growers to raise as many as four plants for medicinal use.

One element that has local leaders including the New York State Association of Counties asking questions is Cuomo’s plan to allow major cities and counties the ability to opt out of the law.

All counties could opt out, but only large cities with populations of more than about 100,000 or more would be eligible to do so. The intent is to make it clear where recreational marijuana

use is allowed by taking advantage of clear signage that identifies big cities and county lines, said Jason Conwall, Cuomo spokesman.

But the New York State Association of Counties wants more information on what it called “a complex area of public policy.”

“It does make sense in some instances for a regional government to have the ability to make decisions like this and we are looking at this, but we are sort of neutral on it now,” said NYSAC Executive Director Stephen J. Acquario. “We’re trying to figure out the revenue side of it as well.”

Cuomo provided few additional details Tuesday, but fol-

lowed a lead by the Assembly’s Democratic majority to steer manufacturing and operations to minority communities that have borne the brunt of police arrests for marijuana, despite studies that show the drug had been consumed by whites and minorities at about the same rate.

“Let’s create an industry that serves the community that paid the price and not rich corporations,” Cuomo said to some of the loudest applause in his nearly two-hour budget presentation.

Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie (D-Bronx) said he liked what he heard but noted that he needs to see details in upcoming budget bills.

The effort to legalize weed is getting opposition by physicians and from some New

York legislators.

“There is not enough long-term evidence to demonstrate this is something that is safe and won’t harm our communities,” said Sarah Ravenhall, executive director of the state Association of County Health Officials. “There is a lot of short-term evidence and journal articles that suggest we should be concerned.”

“Physicians,” the Medical Society of the State of New York stated, “are very concerned that marijuana is an addictive drug that can have significant adverse public health impacts if it were to be legalized for non-medicinal purposes.”

There also are questions about Cuomo’s estimate that legalizing weed could bring in \$300 million to the state.

Cuomo: Overhaul MTA and let state steer

BY ALFONSO A. CASTILLO
alfonso.castillo@newsday.com

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo on Tuesday proposed a major overhaul of the MTA, including exerting more control over of the embattled public authority and implementing a long-debated congestion pricing plan that would create new tolls for driving in Manhattan.

At his annual State of the State and budget address in Albany, Cuomo said the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s problems are about “management and . . . money,” and outlined two major proposals to revamp both. On the management side, Cuomo vowed in his executive budget to work with the State Legislature “to establish clear authority over the MTA.”

Although short on details, the proposal suggests Cuomo will seek to control the majority of the votes on the 17-member board. Under current law, the governor appoints the board chairman and five other members. New York City’s mayor appoints four other members, and county executives throughout the MTA’s service region pick the rest of the board’s voting members. Cuomo said the result is a “diabolical” structure where “everybody is in charge,” and “no one is in charge.”



Gov. Cuomo is pushing for the adoption of a congestion pricing toll plan for parts of Manhattan.

“It was purposefully designed so that everyone can point fingers at everybody else, and nobody is responsible. Why? Because no politician wanted to be responsible. No politician wants to be the one that suggested a fare increase,” Cuomo said. “I’m telling you, that is the fundamental problem with the MTA.”

Cuomo said it was critical the organizational change be made this year, in part because of the need to advance several major transportation initiatives in the region. Those include projects involving the LIRR, such as construction of a third track between Floral Park and Hicksville, the redevelopment of Penn Station, and the \$11.2

billion East Side Access project linking the railroad to Grand Central Terminal.

Cuomo’s proposal appeared to have some early support by some MTA board members, including Suffolk representative Mitchell Pally, who agreed that the antiquated makeup of the board diffuses accountability. Board member Charles Mo-

erdler, who was appointed by the governor’s office, said he agreed “it’s time this monolith get a good, thorough shake-up.”

Kevin Law, president of the Long Island Association, a business and planning group, said: “If the governor wants to step up and be the one accountable, I think the legislature should give him that power because he knows how to get things done.”

The governor’s call comes as the MTA has struggled in recent years with worsening delays on its subway system and the LIRR. To fund improvements, Cuomo is pushing for adoption of a congestion pricing plan that would toll vehicles traveling into Manhattan at 60th Street or below. Cuomo said that plan would generate \$15 billion a year for the MTA.

Cuomo said MTA expenses not covered should be split 50-50 between New York City and the state. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said he disagreed with the governor’s concept and said the agency has to be more efficient.

“It is not enough to simply come up with a revenue package and then repeat the same mistakes of the past in terms of how money is spent,” said de Blasio, who singled out East Side Access as “the poster child for inefficiency.”