

LI cops: We'll keep making pot arrests

Say they will enforce marijuana law even as NYC backs off

BY MICHAEL O'KEEFFE
AND ROBERT BRODSKY
michael.okeeffe@newsday.com
robert.brodsky@newsday.com

Pot smokers on Long Island shouldn't expect a pass like their New York City counterparts.

Nassau and Suffolk law enforcement officials said they intend to keep arresting low-level marijuana offenders even though the city is backing off because of a wide racial gap in arrests.

The counties will change direction only if Albany changes the law to address the disproportional impact on minorities. Like the city, Long Island's arrest rates for marijuana possession are far higher for African-Americans and Hispanics, records show.

For Nassau and Suffolk police commissioners, the decision to stand firm on making marijuana arrests is clear-cut: It's their job.

"The law in place is the law we enforce," Nassau's Patrick Ryder said in a statement.

"The Suffolk County Police Department is responsible for enforcing all laws on the books and will continue to carry out that responsibility by arresting people who violate the law," Commissioner Geraldine Hart said.

Practicality is also a consideration for the Nassau County district attorney's office, which works with a patchwork of law enforcement agencies.

"Unlike New York City, Nassau has not only our county-wide police department, but also many municipal departments and, absent legislative direction, uniform policymaking is challenging," said spokesman Brendan Brosh.

Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini didn't return requests for comment.

Last week, the Manhattan and Brooklyn district attorneys said



Law enforcement officials await changes on pot laws from Albany.

they would stop prosecuting possession and smoking violations in the interest of fairness.

"The dual mission of the Manhattan D.A.'s office is a safer New York and a more equal justice system," District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. said. "The ongoing arrest and criminal prosecution of predominantly black and brown New Yorkers for smoking marijuana serves neither of these goals."

The policy pivot reflects New York City's growing awareness of racial disparity in marijuana arrests: African-Americans and Hispanics accounted for 86 percent of the arrests for marijuana possession, records show.

Mayor Bill de Blasio announced Sunday he will take steps to prepare for the "likely" legalization of recreational marijuana in the city. He will order the NYPD, which is currently holding a 30-day working group looking at its marijuana policing methods, to stop arresting New Yorkers who smoke pot in public and to instead issue summonses.

On Long Island, arrest rates for marijuana possession are four times higher for minorities than for whites — five arrests for

10,000 whites and 20 arrests for 10,000 nonwhites, records show.

The District of Columbia and nine states, including Massachusetts and Vermont in the Northeast, have already legalized recreational marijuana use and the movement is gaining momentum in New York.

About a month ago, Democrat Cynthia Nixon made marijuana legalization the top policy priority in her bid to unseat Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo. She cited the racial disparity in prosecutions.

After Nixon's announcement, Cuomo said his administration would produce a study on legalization this month. The governor previously called marijuana a "gateway" drug and opposed legalization, but since has softened his stance.

Several lawmakers in Albany support a bill stuck in committee and some rank-and-file Democrats are calling for the state party to adopt a pro-legalization stance at its convention Wednesday and Thursday in Uniondale.

To Garden City defense attorney Steve Epstein, the county-by-county approach to enforcement is deeply flawed.

Arrests for marijuana possession and sales

Year	Nassau	Suffolk
2016	1,319	1,393
2015	905	1,387
2014	920	1,518
2013	922	1,790
2012	766	1,869

Source: State Division of Criminal Justice Services

"It's unfair to have two sets of rules — one for New York City and another for Long Island," Epstein said. "We need statewide policy."

Relaxed enforcement has the support of Jeffrey Reynolds, an addiction expert and president of the Mineola-based Family and Children's Association.

Reynolds would like to see any savings from fewer marijuana arrests poured into drug education and prevention programs.

"We need a comprehensive approach where we address the public health risks of marijuana without arresting people for holding a dime bag," Reynolds said.

Melissa Moore of the Drug Policy Alliance welcomes New York City's enforcement retreat but called it a "bandage on a gaping hole" that fails to permanently remedy racial disparities in low-level drug arrests.

Even misdemeanor arrests for marijuana possession can keep young people from getting jobs or housing. A conviction could lead to the revocation of a student loan or could be considered a violation of immigration status, said Moore, the alliance's deputy state director.

"This is a systematic issue which requires a systematic solution," she said. *With Yancey Roy*

NYPD: BOY, 14, POSED AS COP

NEW YORK — A wily 14-year-old boy who posed as a New York City police officer while snatching a legally blind man's wallet in a Manhattan subway station on pretense of helping him was arrested on Sunday.

His mother turned the baby-faced youth in to police nearly a week after authorities said he fled the subway station at 34th Street and Eighth Avenue, near Macy's, leaving his victim behind.

On May 14, police said he approached the 64-year-old man, identifying himself as an officer and offering to lead him through the station and past a turnstile to his train.

Surveillance video shows the man standing quietly as the teenager unzips his backpack and takes the wallet. The boy then bolts out with the wallet, which police said contained \$85 cash and several credit cards. One card was charged \$500 at a nearby store, police said.

The teen's name was not released due to his age. — AP

Apology for prom tickets

CHERRY HILL, N.J. — The principal of a New Jersey high school has apologized for what he called "insensitive" language on tickets for the upcoming senior prom.

The Courier Post reported the Cherry Hill High School East senior prom tickets urged students to "party like it's 1776" during the event at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center.

Principal Dennis Perry said in a letter to the community posted on his Twitter account Friday that some people were offended, and he wanted to apologize "for the hurt feelings this reference caused for members of our school family."

"It was insensitive and irresponsible not to appreciate that not all communities can celebrate what life was like in 1776," Perry said.

He said he especially wanted to apologize to black students. — AP