

Passion in marijuana debate

Legalization forum draws strong pleas for and against

BY CHRISTINE CHUNG
christine.chung@newsday.com

Some Long Islanders spoke passionately about the benefits of marijuana, while others warned of potential risks such as youth access at a listening session Thursday at Hofstra University to gather community input about the possible state legalization of recreational marijuana.

Ruthanne McCormack a

project coordinator for the Rockville Centre Coalition for Youth, described marijuana as a “gateway drug for youth.”

“More stoned people do not help society,” she said. “Today’s marijuana is much more potent than in the past.”

But Evan Miller said that rather being a gateway drug, marijuana was an “exit drug that helps people get off opiates” and that it shouldn’t be a federal schedule 1 drug classified with heroin.

Attendees at Thursday’s session echoed the results of a recent poll commissioned by South Nassau Communities Hospital, which found that about half of the 600 people sur-

veyed in the metropolitan area favor legalization.

The overarching message of most speakers, regardless of their stance on legalization, was that the state should proceed carefully with the exploration process.

“Cigarettes and alcohol are sold in every corner store,” Ed Mesa said, though they are associated with health risks. Marijuana, meanwhile, is “all hugs, all love, all family, all day. New York, Hempstead, this is the place. We need to do this progressively and the right way.”

Hundreds of people turned out for the session, one of 15 planned across New York to field community input about

draft marijuana legislation for the State Legislature to consider in its upcoming session. It was the only one scheduled for Nassau County.

The listening sessions are the latest in a series of steps taken by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to research legalizing marijuana. In January, Cuomo tasked the Department of Health with assessing the impact of a regulated marijuana market in New York. The study, which was completed in July, found that “the positive effects of a regulated marijuana market in New York State outweigh the potential negative impacts.”

In August, Cuomo created a working group to draft legisla-

tion while considering factors such as the impact of legalized marijuana on public health, criminal justice and state revenue.

Jeff Reynolds, CEO of Mineola-based Family and Children’s Association of Long Island, is one of the working group’s 20 members. He said before the hearing that the working group is proceeding carefully in assessing the potential risks of legalized marijuana.

“New York State is certainly not a first mover in this regard, and given the magnitude of this shift [to recreational marijuana], you don’t want to be first out of the gate,” Reynolds said. “Even if you’re for this, nobody wants to see this turn into a horror show.”

NRA fundraising event draws protesters

BY NICHOLAS SPANGLER
nicholas.spangler@newsday.com

A National Rifle Association fundraiser at the Inn at New Hyde Park Thursday night drew subdued protests from about 10 Long Island and Queens residents.

“I oppose the NRA in every way, shape and form, and having them come to my local area and having an event here is disconcerting to me,” said Joan Crinnion, 22, a recent college graduate from Garden City.

Signs like “Vote out NRA accomplices in Congress” drew honks and a few boos from passing motorists on Jericho Turnpike.

The event raised money for the NRA Foundation, a nonprofit supporting the “firearm-related public interest activities” of the NRA, according to its website.

Laurence C. Dittmer, 49, of Levittown, a firearms instructor and former foundation committee member, said there were 461 attendees inside. That number could not be verified because venue staff would not let a reporter inside.

Promotional materials for the event advertised dinner tickets for \$65 per person, \$2,000 for a Charlton Heston Table of Ten. Auction and raffle highlights included a John Wayne Lil’ Duke BB Rifle and a Henry Lever Action Shotgun with Second Amendment engraving and an NRA seal.



Randi Lavine, Chita Brathwaite and Craig Mark among about 10 anti-NRA protesters Thursday at the Inn at New Hyde Park.

Money raised at the event will go toward national and local firearms safety programs, he said.

Protesters earlier this month had called for a boycott of the Inn over the NRA fundraiser

and said some groups, including the Nassau County Democratic Committee, had canceled events there over concerns about the event. Management said the Inn had signed a contract in December to host the

fundraiser and does not discriminate against customers.

Protester Craig Mark, 60, a retired construction worker from Bayside, Queens, expressed empathy for both the Inn management, because they had workers

to pay, and the NRA supporters inside, but said they needed to take into consideration a “crisis” of gun violence in schools.

“It can’t be swept under the carpet as a conspiracy,” he said. “It’s a reality.”