

Tribune editorial: Medical cannabis is just beginning in Utah

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(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) During the House of Representatives floor debate, Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck offered up her own medical cannabis bill, that would've retained most of Prop 2 while making some technical fixes. Lawmakers overhauled the Utah Medical Cannabis Act, Monday, Dec. 2, 2018, overhauling the medical cannabis distribution system, reducing the number of medical marijuana outlets, prohibiting edibles and changing the list of illnesses that qualify for cannabis treatments.

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Call it a glass half full.

The Utah Legislature should have respected the will of the electorate and left Proposition 2 alone. Or perhaps just passed the bill proffered by Democrats, the one that would have made just a few technical tweaks in the voter-approved measure that legalized certain forms of medical cannabis for specific maladies.

But, jealous of sharing their legislative authority with the people (even though the Utah Constitution says they must), both houses of the Legislature rapidly passed, and Gov. Gary Herbert quickly signed, The Medical Cannabis Act. That is the bill that was described as a compromise between what the people of Utah said they wanted, by passing Prop 2, and what a mighty array of the powers that be would have preferred, which was nothing.

What happened on Capitol Hill Monday was a step back. Or half a step back.

Some Utahns will now be able to receive and use specified forms of marijuana for a specified list of ailments for which, there is every reason to believe, the active chemicals in the plant can bring significant relief. And they will be able to do so without risking criminal prosecution and/or traveling to states where marijuana is legal, either as a medicine or as recreation.

But some others won't. The decision to remove most auto-immune diseases from the list of approved conditions seems simply churlish. And those who are eligible will have fewer places they can go to obtain the substances that promise relief.

Those who called the new bill a compromise included some, but not all, of those who organized, wrote, petitioned and campaigned for Prop 2. The feeling of those on the pro-cannabis side who went along with the bill was that just keeping Prop 2 intact was not a politically realistic option. The cannons aligned against it, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Utah Medical Association, were just too strong.

Reasonably unwilling to face a choice of all or nothing, the Prop 2 backers at the Utah Patients Coalition agreed, even before the votes were cast in the referendum, to do a deal. That agreement not only drew a promise from Herbert and House Speaker Greg Hughes to keep some of what Prop 2 promised, it also provided for a partial cease-fire in what would almost certainly have been a barrage of negative advertising against the proposition, a campaign might have led to a different outcome at the polls.

Herbert promises to implement the provisions and bureaucracy of The Medical Cannabis Act with all deliberate speed. If that happens, and proper care is taken to satisfy those who are frightened of some marijuana falling into the hands of those who aren't eligible, or spilling into the black market (as if that market were not fully functioning already), there is hope that some of the provisions of the law will be relaxed over time, just as the Legislature has been known, from time to time, to ease up on the laws that limit the sale and consumption of alcohol.

Remember, too, that all this is happening as the nationwide legalization of marijuana, for medicinal use if not altogether, may be a train that has already left the station.

Everyone who cares about the process of allowing medical cannabis to help people — or not — should know that this is not over.

The voters should continue to pay close attention to this issue. And to let their elected officials know what is expected of them.

