April 13, 2015

Opinion Editorial
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Cities and the state must partner for Washington's new marijuana system to work, and that partnership begins with revenue sharing

In November 2012, the voters of Washington State approved Initiative 502 (I-502), legalizing recreational marijuana statewide. With legalization, it was predicted we'd see a more tightly-regulated legal marijuana market that would eradicate the black market, and a decrease in marijuana-related crime. Revenues for public safety and health were also projected to increase.

Whereas I-502 now generates new revenue for the state, it does not require this revenue be spent at the local level.

Cities are where the rubber meets the road. They are where the majority of the state's population lives, learns, works and plays. The majority of local public safety personnel are employed in cities, and cities are where marijuana enforcement, education and prevention activities occur.

While the legalization of recreational marijuana is keeping the promise of generating revenue, predictions about decreased crime and the elimination of a black market are not being met. What is more, the new recreational marijuana market has highlighted the need for robust public education efforts to limit youth access and exposure, and address public health concerns.

Recreational marijuana sales are growing. To-date, legal sales have brought in over $31 million in excise tax revenue to state government. By 2017-2019 that amount is expected to reach over $362 million. While the state is gaining, cities are losing. None of the excise tax revenues generated are being shared with cities, and only a very small portion of retail sales tax are retained by cities.

Even though revenues are strong, the black market continues to thrive and public safety and health concerns remain. The Economic and Revenue Forecast Council predicts illicit marijuana will continue to make up 64% of the market in 2017. Public safety and health continue to be issues that challenge our communities, and youth exposure and use of marijuana have seen alarming increases. And it is our communities – our cities – that are dealing with the brunt of these impacts.

Cities cannot wait, we are already experiencing the impacts of marijuana legalization. Accidental marijuana ingestion by the very young, overdoses, crime and other public health concerns are weighing heavily on cities. We need revenue to help address these impacts today.

Cities applaud the Legislature for taking the first steps in acknowledging our need for shared revenues. However, current revenue sharing proposals fall far too-short of what is needed for cities to make real and meaningful impacts in our communities. We cannot afford to fail in this endeavor, especially when it comes to public safety, public health and youth prevention. Cities support a tightly-regulated medical and recreational marijuana market where illicit activity is prevented and public health and youth prevention are prioritized.

Cities and the state must partner for this new system to work, and that partnership begins with revenue sharing.

The decision rests in the hands of the Legislature.

As the Senate and House work together to craft a compromise budget cities implore lawmakers to put the safety of their communities, their public and their youth first, and share a meaningful portion of marijuana tax revenues with cities. Strong cities make a great state. But strong cities need the state's investment.