

Decriminalized: Looking at new weed law

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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WOOD RIVER - The **Wood River City Council** voted unanimously to pass the **Cannabis Control Act** at their Dec. 19 meeting.

The Cannabis Control Act allows for anyone possessing as many as 10 grams of cannabis to be charged under a civil city ordinance instead of a criminal charge. Under the act, anyone possessing 10 grams or less of cannabis would be able to be fined up to \$200 with no threat of jail time or a mark on their criminal records.

This ordinance is a response to a state law passed on July 29 of this year, which decriminalized cannabis possession significantly. Under the new law, under 10 grams is a civil violation, 10-30 grams is a Class A misdemeanor, 30-500 grams is a Class

IV felony and more than 500 grams is a Class III felony. **Wood River Mayor Frank Akers** said the Wood River ordinance will allow the city to collect fines when someone is in possession of 10 grams or less of cannabis.

"What many municipalities are doing is coming up with other ordinances, so they can fine people," Akers said. "In the past, the **City of Wood River** has never had an ordinance to cover up to 10 grams of cannabis. These would almost be like traffic fines. We could fine them up to \$200, but it would not equate to jail time, or a criminal record. If someone was in trouble for something else, we could punish them at least a little bit for possession."

Anything above 10 grams will become a state or federal issue, depending on the amount, Akers said. Up until this law, the city had no regulation and would do whatever was mandated by the state.



Alton Mayor Brant Walker said the **City of Alton** would continue to stay in accordance with state statutes, regardless of further decriminalization.

"If push comes to shove, we follow state statutes anyway, and they seem to be loosening things up," Walker said.

Both Akers and Walker said they expect the trend toward full legalization to continue, but neither seemed partial to new laws either restricting or allowing cannabis possession and usage.

"I really don't care one way or another," Akers said. "It's nothing I have ever had a problem with or has been a concern to me. More of a concern to me has been heroin. It seems to be more inexpensive, readily available and much more dangerous."

Walker and **Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons** agreed with Akers's stance regarding heroin. Walker said Alton's biggest problems involving drugs have been heroin and crack. He said the **Alton Police Department** has increased their drug task force by 33 percent, which has resulted in a nearly 300 percent spike in arrests in **Alton**.

"The people who are dying and suffering here seem to be due to heroin, which is a nationwide trend," Walker said. "A year or so back, we had a spike in nuisance crimes, such as copper theft. The people committing those crimes weren't committing those crimes to get groceries."

Chief Simmons said his department would continue to charge drug offenders, regardless of their usage of crack, heroin and cannabis.

"We will still build drug cases based on marijuana use," he said. "I still believe marijuana is a catalyst for other drugs. If kids start off with marijuana, studies show they have a higher risk of making their ways toward other drugs in the future."

Officers in Wood River and Alton will continue to follow protocol when cannabis possession is suspected. First, police check for a medical marijuana permit if cannabis is smelled, or otherwise detected. If such a permit cannot be presented, charges or fines may follow, depending on the amount.