

Illegal pot grows increasing problem in S. Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Inhale deeply in many South Lake Tahoe neighborhoods and the stench of skunk permeates the nostrils. But it isn't wildlife; it's marijuana being grown indoors.

Need some weed? South Lake Tahoe is your answer – especially for people with medical marijuana cards. Tahoe Wellness Cooperative, the only medicinal marijuana shop in the city since the other two were shutdown, has 19,000 members. (The whole city has 21,286 residents.) Cody Bass, who runs the dispensary, says 8,000 of them are locals. (This is more than the number of registered voters.)

The city in 2011 made pot shops legal with an array of rules that had to be followed. An audit of TWC this summer showed the collective didn't provide the quantity of pot coming and going from the Highway 50 facility. This has Police Chief Brian Uhler concerned. For one, it's part of the ordinance that the amount of pot bought and sold must be provided to city officials when requested. Second, it means it is hard to discern where the pot is coming from – locally, imported, clients, other. Third, officials don't know if the outgoing pot is going to patients or being sold illegally.

Uhler gave a presentation to the South Lake Tahoe City Council on Sept. 16 that raised a number of questions.

"We don't know marijuana is not being diverted into illegal markets because there are not adequate records," Uhler said.

He said his main concern for getting a handle on the situation is for the health and safety of the community. Fire is of the utmost concern.

The blaze at the mobile home last week had an illegal marijuana grow inside.

However, Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*, “(The) fire was undetermined, so no conclusions if it was caused or not caused by the grow.”

Still, illegal grows are problematic. Many have overloaded the electrical system, which leaves the system susceptible to fire.

“Marijuana grows are 24 times more likely to catch fire than a normal structure,” Uhler said.

Thirteen grows have been found in the city this year. Gareth Harris, fire chief with Lake Valley, said in his jurisdiction 20 illegal grows have been found in 2014.

“We are just scratching the surface,” Uhler said.

He estimates there are 300 illegal grows in the city. Only nine are legally permitted. Matt Underhill, commander for South Lake El Dorado Narcotics Enforcement Team, told the council there could be just as many illegal grow houses on the South Shore of El Dorado County.

He said SLEDNET receives between six and 12 complaints a week about suspected illegal grows. Investigating them all takes time and resources, which diverts agents from dealing with the more serious drugs in the community like heroin, meth and cocaine.

Uhler believes if the pot ordinance were tweaked a bit to take away the financial incentives for growers, that there may be fewer issues in town. He wants the dispensary to only be able to receive marijuana from permitted residential cultivators. He also wants to make sure people are then growing the limited amount allowed. This, he said in his PowerPoint, would cut off “illegal cultivators from their source of revenue.”

Later this fall the council will revisit the issue. Tuesday's session was just information and not an action item.