

Opinion: Anxiety over Calif.'s transitioning cannabis industry

By Joe Mathews

California tokers, why are you trippin' so hard?

You keep saying that marijuana helps manage anxiety. But those of you who work in or partake of the cannabis industry sound like the most stressed-out people in California.



Joe Mathews

And that leaves me wondering what's in your bong, especially since 2016 is supposed to be a year of great triumph for you. Cannabis is booming in California. New regulations on medical marijuana are coming together, and a November ballot initiative to legalize recreational use seems likely to pass. California is thus well on its way to becoming Mary Jane's global capital, and a national model for how to pull cannabis out of the black market shadows and into the legal light.

So if the future looks so dank (that's stoner-speak for awesome), why do you all look so wrecked?

Did you get some bad schwag or something?

In talking to some of you in recent weeks, I've learned there are two reasons why you're stressed out.

The first involves all the necessary pressure you're putting on yourselves. Cannabis is not just an industry, it's a movement to end prohibition, and the hardest times for movements can come right when they are on the verge of winning what they want. Your movement's victory—the end of cannabis prohibition—requires a difficult transition that is stressful and scary.

In California, by one estimate, there are as many as 10,000 cannabis-related businesses—only a couple hundred of which have the proper zoning and licenses to operate a medical marijuana business. That leaves thousands of you trying to work out your futures very quickly—at least before 2018, when regulations for medical marijuana (including a state marijuana czar) and for recreational use (assuming the ballot initiative passes) are supposed to be in place.

Some of you may choose to shut down. But others of you are engulfed in the difficult, expensive process of making your businesses legal quickly—but not so quickly that you run afoul of local police who are still conducting raids on your operations or federal authorities who already making banking and paying taxes so difficult for you. On top of all this stress comes the burden of being a political cause. Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom is trying to build a gubernatorial campaign by backing the ballot initiative to legalize recreational use.

That brings me to the second source of pressure on you: the constant outside demands on your industry from those of us in what cinematic stoner Jeffrey “The Dude” Lebowski called “the Square Community.”

California leaders have gotten way too high on the possibilities of fully legal marijuana. Today politicians and media claim that legal cannabis in California will end the drug war, rationalize our prison and court systems, create new jobs and economic opportunities in poorer and rural areas of the state, save agricultural businesses and lands, and

replenish strained local and state budgets with new taxes on weed.

Los Angeles County recently debated a plan to address its homelessness crisis with a marijuana tax. Environmentalists have been touting how marijuana farming can pioneer water-saving practices to mitigate the state drought. No small number of musicians—among them Snoop Dogg, the wizard of “weed wellness,” and Tommy Chong, the “godfather of ganja”—seem to think that by licensing their names to marijuana products, they can replace some of the revenues music used to provide.

Cannabis has come to be seen by its most zealous champions as a substance that can alter California realities—in ways reminiscent of our craze for gold in 1849 or for oil in the early 20th century. That is an awful lot of expectation riding on this one plant.

Before exploiting legal marijuana for their own schemes, California governments need to get this transition right. The tax system for cannabis should be comprehensible and not so extortionate that it drives out small players (or creates incentives to keep the black market alive). The regulatory regimes for medical marijuana and recreational use should fit together, and be transparent enough that California cannabis goes forward as a competitive market, not a state monopoly. To ease the transition, state government needs to do everything it can to help you—the growers, processors, dispensary operators and customers—negotiate these changes, including protecting you from the feds.

If California gets this right, maybe some of the biggest dreams for marijuana can come true. At the very least, cannabis could be a thriving and well-regulated industry.

But for now, as the marijuana-friendly rap group Cypress Hill like to say, we all gotta chill. These are stressful enough times for stoners already.

*Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California
column for Zocalo Public Square.*