

Marijuana Dispensaries Are Targeted

Riverside County

Officials say they fear distribution centers for medical use of the drug could be robbed. They also cite federal law.

By SARA LIN
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The Riverside County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to prohibit medical marijuana dispensaries, calling them magnets for crime and citing federal laws prohibiting the drug.

The decision comes nearly 10 months after Riverside County became the first county in Southern California to issue photo identification cards in an effort to comply with a 1996 state law shielding medical users from federal prosecution.

Supervisors said their vote Tuesday was influenced by a "white paper" released last week by Dist. Atty. Grover Trask, which called the dispensaries il-

legal outposts that would make easy targets for robbers.

"It's very hard to go against our district attorney. He is a very responsible man and he's stepped up to the plate and provided leadership here," said Supervisor Marion Ashley.

The supervisors voted 4 to 1 to reject a proposal to license four regional dispensaries in unincorporated parts of the county.

The board also voted to outlaw marijuana-growing cooperatives and to join San Diego and San Bernardino counties in suing the state to overturn the state law requiring counties to issue medical marijuana cards.

The counties contend that the federal prohibition of marijuana use takes precedence.

Tuesday's hearing, which drew about 80 spectators, pitted local law enforcement agencies against dispensary proponents, who tried to shake the image of medical marijuana users as illicit drug users.

In addition, a few parents told supervisors they were worried about the potentially negative ef-

fect marijuana dispensaries would have on teenagers.

"It's so easy for kids to get marijuana these days, and I don't think we should make it any easier," said Nancy Faulstich, 51, a mother of three from Rancho Mirage.

Medical marijuana supporters said they were crushed by the decision, calling the supervisors cowards and shouting as they walked out of the meeting.

"They're pushing everyone out onto the streets," said Nathan Archer, 38, of San Diego, who said he started using marijuana medically seven years ago for chronic pain following a construction accident. "They've said in there they're going to arrest us, but for what? For trying not to suffer?"

Medical marijuana users and medical experts say monitored dosages of marijuana can relieve the pain of patients with serious illnesses. People with AIDS, chronic pain and mood disorders are among those who use the drug.

Opponents say that if medic-

inal users need marijuana, they should grow their own, not buy it at a dispensary that would be an easy target for robberies and assaults.

But cannabis is a finicky plant, several medicinal users told the board, and growing your own isn't always easy.

"I can't grow it myself. I've tried and failed every time," said Ryan Michaels, 24, who said he started using marijuana two years ago for pain after he fractured his arm.

"I need a safe place where I can get it," he told the board.

In 1996, California voters approved Prop. 215, legalizing the drug for therapeutic use. In 2003, state legislation was approved allowing counties to issue identification cards to medical users to shield them from prosecution by local law enforcement.

But the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June that federal authorities could still seize and destroy marijuana stashes and arrest growers and consumers — even in the 11 states that allow medical marijuana use. Federal

law says all marijuana use is illegal.

State Atty. Gen. Bill Lockyer has told local governments to follow state laws, which make it clear that medicinal marijuana use is legal, but some counties have resisted.

Supervisor Roy Wilson was the lone voice supporting licensing dispensaries.

"I think we're sticking our heads in the sand," he said. "I think we have an issue to deal with and that is state law."

Marijuana "has been around a long time. It's not going to go away by doing away with dispensaries," he said.

Medical marijuana advocate James M. Anthony took issue with Trask's labeling of dispensaries as crime magnets.

"If we follow that line of argument, then we should ban all banks. They attract robbers. Murders happen there. They're dangerous places. So we should close all banks," said Anthony, an Oakland-based attorney.