

Ski towns worry pot is bad for tourism

By Kristen Wyatt, AP

BRECKENRIDGE, Colo. – Business is booming in Colorado's mountain resorts, and the addition of recreational marijuana stores this year has attracted customers curious about legalized pot. But there's mounting anxiety that ski towns have embraced stoner culture a little too much, potentially damaging the state's tourism brand.

That worry flared up in two resort towns last week. In Breckenridge, residents voted overwhelmingly to force downtown's lone dispensary off Main Street to a less-visible location. And just up the road in Granby, town officials used a property annex to prevent a dispensary from opening.

The fear is that some families – a mainstay of the ski tourism industry – will stop vacationing here.

"It's not a morality issue, or that we think marijuana is bad," said Breckenridge Councilman Gary Gallagher, who supported legal marijuana but also voted to force the Breckenridge Cannabis Club out of downtown. "Marijuana, it is not in this country's DNA yet. It's a little bit too early."

So far, there's no indication that legal pot has damaged tourism, Colorado's No. 2 industry. The state notched a record \$17.3 billion in tourism spending the year after legalization, with a record 64.6 million visitors, and state tourism officials say 2014 is poised to top last year's record.

But it's an open question whether pot has anything to do with it. Officials cite the improving economy and the weather, with healthy snow totals historically being the most significant driver for mountain visits.

The state and its marijuana industry are barred by law from advertising weed out of state, and the head of the Colorado Tourism Office says the state isn't tracking the role of marijuana in tourist behavior.

"It's all anecdotal," Al White said. "I have heard from some angry parents who said they'll never come back to Colorado because of marijuana. And I've also heard from people who say they came to Colorado just to see the marijuana.

"At the end of the day, it may be having a modest effect, but it's not huge either way."

The recent friction isn't the first time officials have moved to lower marijuana's profile.

The nation's largest ski operator, Vail Resorts, made headlines over the last year tearing down makeshift shelters built illicitly in hard-to-reach areas and used by stoners to "get safe," mountain slang for toking up out of the cold and away from ski patrollers. Resorts across the state are dotted with the so-called smoke shacks, and some of them are decades old.

"We will continue to communicate that consumption of marijuana is illegal in public and on federal land," Vail Resorts' Russ Pecoraro said in a statement about destroying the shacks in its four areas, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Keystone and Vail.

Still, at rates greater than their urban neighbors, mountain communities backed marijuana legalization in 2012, including Breckenridge, an early and enthusiastic support base, and there's no doubt that recreational pot has had an effect on ski towns.

A state-produced July report on the new marijuana industry concluded that 90 percent of recreational sales in mountain resort communities go to out-of-state visitors.

The influx of shoppers – and camera crews that have become frequent sights as they work on pot-themed news stories and documentaries – has prompted a lively debate among residents about how pot is changing their resorts.

“Whether you’re pro-marijuana or against marijuana, you have to be concerned about how tourists react to seeing it,” said Bob Gordman, a Breckenridge retiree who voted to move the dispensary.

Others say the marijuana novelty will die down naturally and that resort towns shouldn’t worry about dispensaries or the souvenir shops that put “Rocky Mountain High” puns on T-shirts.

“In five or 10 years, it’ll be no big issue,” said Bill Kiser, a Breckenridge retiree who voted to keep the dispensary on Main Street.

“Why don’t families get turned off when they go on vacation and see a bar and people drinking alcohol? Because they’re used to it,” Kiser said. “People will eventually get used to this, too.”