

Opinion: SLT police chief's views on marijuana

Publisher's note: The following is an email sent March 24 by South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler to David Orr of the subcommittee working on recreational cannabis after learning the group was convening without him or the two council members assigned to the working group. Lake Tahoe News was sent the letter by a community member. The City Council is having a special meeting at 4pm March 27 at Lake Tahoe Airport to discuss recreational marijuana and Tahoe Wellness Cooperative.

Hello David [Orr],

Thank you for letting me know. Hope you have a good meeting.

Please email any questions or concerns—if there are any particular concerns I could address in advance, I'd appreciate it.



Brian Uhler

I realize that the subcommittee's position for the best path forward may be different than the city staff position (and my individual position).

I hope you and the rest of the subcommittee do not hold any ill feelings. I assure you, my concern on the issue of MJ is focused on the health and we'll-being of the community as a whole. I make no extra money for caring, which I most

definitely do (or conversely for not caring). To be completely open with you—it would probably be much better for me (professionally speaking) if I could have a little less heart in this. I am rather sure a more “milk toast,” safety-net oriented and politically concerned chief would be more universally liked—especially on this polarizing issue..but that’s not me. I am rather certain that there might be a City Council member (or members) who would prefer I not do the “police chief thing” on this issue—not doing so would probably help me with political “points” (but also, I am confident that some council members appreciate my honest, consistent and clear perspective).

I have made no secret from the subcommittee members (or co-chairs) regarding the potential “clash of opinions/ideas” path we have been upon for the last several months. However, during the process, I hope the subcommittee members have found me to be respectful and pleasant despite my “police centric” viewpoint. I hope you realize that I am just doing my job.

It is through my work life that I have closely witnessed the downside of MJ (especially when mixed with life emotional upheaval, mental health problems, other drug use, crime, etc). It’s at least a once a week thing for the officers in our town to see nice young lives in a downward MJ related spiral (sometimes causing lifelong harm ... often accompanied/complicated by co-existing issues).

Further, I regularly attend meeting of the community health advisory council (CHAC) and mental health consortium. In these venues community drug use is routinely considered by most in these “helping profession” roles as being a significant problem for SLT (for years, assessments/surveys have demonstrated the recurring theme).

I recognize the police experience can be slanted. As an officer, we are trained to try and guard against being “jaded” or forming strong opinions about the broad human condition

when, day in and day out, you see the ugly, bad, sad, and tragic. I ask you (and other subcommittee member if you choose to share this email) to try to guard against any bias you may have for me because I happen to wear a police uniform and my perspective has been shaped by more than 35 years of police service/experiences.

This said, I do realize and agree that many, successful and productive people who use marijuana exist and never come into the view of police. I hope that you likewise realize that just because I am a police officer and an employee of the city my role or experiences count less (or shouldn't be included). It could be easily argued that I am specifically expected (and compensated) to bring the real life SLTPD experiences which relate to our community's health into the view of the community and especially our elected officials so they have meaningful insights to make well-informed, tough decisions. Would you agree that if I stayed clear of this unfolding situation and an ugly picture emerged later, some elected officials would complain they were not properly informed?

The way I see this is pretty simple ... the subcommittee, staff, public, those who want to make money in MJ business, those who represent community interests (school officials, mental health service providers, hospital representatives), those who don't want MJ to harm their business interest (e.g. tourism), etc., all make their voices heard to our elected officials. The elected officials are entrusted with the duty to represent and protect the public, make well-reasoned decisions with community interests over personal or political advantage, and at the end of it all make the really tough choices (even if they are unpopular). When all this is done, we should be thankful that they took all of our input, weighed it, and were willing to be "out there" and have courage on issues like MJ.

In August, as the dialogue on MJ was just warming up, I spoke with our City Council and explained that I would ultimately respect their decision and carry out my duty accordingly (even

though I believed anything beyond a complete ban was wrong).

When the dust settles, I suspect neither the subcommittee, I, or anyone else, will feel like we got what we wanted. That's just the messy method of how things work in a complicated democracy.

While I appreciate the enthusiasm demonstrated by the subcommittee members (many of whom are also TRYP members), I wonder if the TRYP goal of ensuring economic opportunities has been overly emphasized in the subcommittee's work. As I look back over the last few months, I cannot help but feeling like I was on an island when talking with the subcommittee about things like risk, unintended consequences, community harm, or slow/low risk progress. It really seems like the group members lost individual identity and instead viewed social acceptance as more important (group think). I hope that the group's energy and enthusiasm doesn't lead to bad feelings (if it turns out that the group doesn't get total support). Also, your description of needing "ammo to defend the subcommittee's decision" really makes it seem like this is being viewed as a win-lose situation.

I really hope to move past any such feelings (on my part too) when our City Council makes its direction known (maybe we can go cry in a beer together because chances are we'll feel the same).

Sincerely and with respect,
Brian [Uhler]