

**CATHY WURZER:** And by the way, of course, our top story would be the bill to legalize recreational marijuana. It was introduced at the State Capitol today. Supporters of the bill to legalize marijuana use by Minnesotans 21 and older said they hope it will become law soon after the Legislature passes it. Our reporter Brian Bakst has talked to some of the bill's authors and their supporters this morning. He joins us right now. Well, Brian, give us the basics. What would this bill allow?

**BRIAN BAKST:** Cathy, it does a number of things. And I just want to be upfront here. I have not read through every line of this 243-page bill yet. But in short, it sets up a regulated market for legal marijuana sales. And I used the word marijuana. But supporters tend to go with cannabis.

It expands existing medical marijuana program to allow it in a smokable form, which isn't permitted now. But it also sets up a framework for growth of marijuana plants and retail sales subject to limitations and taxation. And another big component is revisiting, and in certain cases wiping clean, criminal convictions for prior marijuana offenses such as possession.

**CATHY WURZER:** So, OK, part of the legislation calls for expunging the criminal records for those who've been convicted of marijuana crimes in the past. Now, how controversial is that?

**BRIAN BAKST:** Well, it remains to be seen whether that part will be controversial. It depends on how it looks in the end after structures. But supporters say it's a vital component. And as introduced, there would be a tiered system. So many misdemeanor offenses for possession would be automatically expunged. It would be up to the state to identify who qualifies, and then go through the process of expunging those records.

For people with marijuana offenses that are felonies, they would go through a process to seek expungement or re-sentencing that wouldn't be automatic. And they couldn't have had an offense where they used maybe a dangerous weapon or inflicted bodily harm. It's going to be very detailed. And what is the final product is going to determine how controversial it ends up being.

**CATHY WURZER:** A number of states, 21, I believe, and the District of Columbia, have already legalized marijuana use by adults. Are there any worries that big companies from other states might try to move in to control the marijuana market in Minnesota if this does become legal?

**BRIAN BAKST:** That has been brought up in the past. And it's one reason why the bill directs a considerable amount of money to building up local cannabis entrepreneurial operations. Just in the first two years, \$17 million would go into what they're calling CAN-startup, CAN-navigate, and CAN-train programs. They're basically to help people newer to the industry wedge their way in, whether that's on the grower side or the retail end. And there's an emphasis on loans and grants to social equity applicants. The thinking there is that communities that suffered the most from aggressive marijuana law enforcement should benefit the most from the new opportunity.

**CATHY WURZER:** So while many folks support this idea, lot of others don't, as you know. Law enforcement, I believe the State Trucking Association, weighed in on this. And others, they oppose legalized marijuana. Do the bill's sponsors acknowledge those concerns? Are they going to make any efforts to address them?

**BRIAN BAKST:** Yeah, and to recap, we've heard about fears of impaired driving, loosened rules around use of marijuana in the workplace, and general substance addiction. Money would flow to substance use treatment and addiction prevention programs. And the bill has specific prohibition of marijuana use on school grounds or buses, daycares, public transportation, or if the smoke or vapor could be inhaled by a minor. Use behind the wheel would be considered a misdemeanor, regardless of your impairment level. And there are criminal penalties, too, for possessing excessive amounts of cannabis flower or products and for selling to anybody under 21.

**CATHY WURZER:** I mentioned there are a lot of people who are supportive of this bill. Let's talk about the public interest in this bill.

**BRIAN BAKST:** A lot, yeah.

**CATHY WURZER:** Yeah.

**BRIAN BAKST:** Yeah, keep in mind that just before this election, there were two major marijuana parties. So there was a lot of political pressure coming in. And Democrats have really taken this issue and run with it. And the public seems to be tuned in to it. Whatever we write about it, whenever we tweet about it, whenever we report on it, we get a lot of public feedback. It's getting a ton of clicks already on our website page in the hour since that story has been up. So the public is quite tuned in.

**CATHY WURZER:** The legislature passed the law last year that opened the door to recreational THC use, the gummies, the edibles, and the drinks, that kind of thing. And that created, as you know, big headaches for local officials and the State Board of Pharmacy, trying to regulate the manufacturing and the sale and the use. Does this law fix the problems with that earlier law?

**BRIAN BAKST:** Yeah, it does, by creating some new licensing categories and parameters. And it also sets up a new state-level agency that they would call the Office of Cannabis Management, which not only would deal with the marijuana legalization for broader purposes, but also these THC edibles. When that was set up, there really seemed to be a gap in who was in charge of policing, safety, and marketing, and other concerns about those products.

**CATHY WURZER:** I was watching the news conference with the DFL leaders on their top priorities for this session. That was yesterday. And I noted that this issue is not on that list. So what are the chances that this could pass this year?

**BRIAN BAKST:** Well, in the room where this bill was outlined today, there was plenty of confidence. And House Speaker Melissa Hortman was there. So it has support at the top of the Chamber. It has passed the House in prior session. The prospects in the Senate are tougher to gauge. Democrats have a slim majority, their new majority.

And the bill really hasn't been aired out there in the past. So it could be more slow going. And we really don't know whether there are-- every DFL senator, or even some Republicans are on board, or if they're going to have to do some education and maybe some arm twisting to get this thing through.

**CATHY WURZER:** This is a budget session. Obviously, you know that. Is there a danger that something like this, this issue could crowd out the other priorities and get bogged down?

**BRIAN BAKST:** Yeah, you know, I asked Speaker Hortman just that. She said it's incumbent on lawmakers and the media to keep it in context. Just because it will be heard so often by committees doesn't mean it's a top of their to-do list, she said. But Cathy, the reality is it's an issue where it will attract so much public notice no matter what. So lawmakers could be viewed as elevating it above the bread and butter items. It's going to be an interesting dance to watch.

**CATHY** Next step for the legislation?

**WURZER:**

**BRIAN BAKST:** The first committee hearing is next week. But this one has to travel through pretty much every committee in the legislature, or at least most of them. So it's got a long, long road ahead. People shouldn't expect this to happen overnight.

**CATHY** All right, thank you, Brian Bakst.

**WURZER:**

**BRIAN BAKST:** You're welcome, Cathy.

**CATHY** That's one of our political reporters, Brian Bakst.

**WURZER:**