
Russ Belville
Host of The Russ Belville Show

What's the Point of Voting When Lawmakers Ignore the Vote?

Posted: 05/12/2015 3:04 pm EDT Updated: 05/12/2015 3:59 pm EDT

You may recall last year that we voters here in Oregon passed statewide marijuana legalization. We're one of the 26 states with some form of citizen lawmaking ability, so we crafted a marijuana legalization initiative, got it on the ballot, and passed it with a 56 percent majority.

The initiative legalized personal marijuana possession and growing and established a system for commercial production, processing, and sales. Much of what was in the initiative was copied-and-pasted from our state's liquor laws, including two key provisions: only a vote of the people in a city or county could ban commercial marijuana licenses and only the state can tax marijuana.

Another huge provision in the new marijuana law was that it was not to affect the existing medical marijuana law. This was so prominent in the campaign for legalization that it was written into the initiative in three separate sections.

In order to implement the recreational marijuana law that declared tinkering with medical marijuana off-limits, the Legislature gathered five representatives and five senators in a joint committee, which was acknowledged often by those who couldn't resist the opportunity to be stand-up comedians ("joint committee, get it?").

Then they let us in on the real joke -- their respect for the will of the voters.

As soon as our Measure 91 was certified, the lobbyists emerged from counting their piles of money to begin subverting democracy. Lobbyists representing city councils and county commissions don't like two key provisions on local marijuana bans and local marijuana taxes. They want the ability for a handful of councilors or commissioners to be able to ban or tax marijuana, no matter what their local constituents think or how the majority of the state voted.

Lobbyists representing commercial marijuana growers and law enforcement don't like the current system of medical marijuana growing. They want the legislature to clamp down with restrictive limits on how many medical marijuana plants may be grown, especially within residential zones.