

SNG-Nowlan-drug use-7-17-11 (just 580 words)

Time for a national conversation about drugs

By Jim Nowlan

I lobbied this past spring for a tightly drawn bill to allow the use of marijuana in Illinois for medical purposes. The legislation was narrowly rejected in the House, where it originated, which suggests to me there is a substantial division of opinion on the issue.

Elsewhere, 15 states allow such use of marijuana, yet the federal government prohibits marijuana drug use and has threatened to crack down on what is legal in those states. Clearly there is confusion about our policies.

And attitudes about punishment appear to be changing. In Peoria, near my hometown, the city council is debating a proposal to make possession of small amounts of marijuana punishable by only a ticketed fine. The idea behind the proposed change, according to the Peoria Journal-Star, is “to make the process more efficient (by taking it out of the courts) and potentially steer extra revenue into the city’s coffers.”

I am a civil libertarian who believes that we should give people the freedom to do what they want so long as they aren’t hurting others. And so I find attractive presidential candidate Ron Paul’s position that the war on drugs has failed, and that we should simply legalize, regulate and tax the use of drugs. This is what we do with alcohol, arguably a more potent and destructive drug than those now prohibited.

At the same time, I am a moderate, who feels we should always move cautiously on important policies and not make big changes with rash quickness.

Thus I think now is a good time for a national conversation about drugs, ideally via a blue ribbon commission that could research a comprehensive assessment of the costs and benefits of our present, decades old “war on drugs” versus those of a more lenient policy on the use of drugs.

The benefits of our present policy would appear to include lesser use of drugs, and the destructive mayhem and addictions that result from drug use, than would obtain under a legalization policy of some sort.

But do we know or have a good sense of how much usage is reduced as a result of our policy? At a recent summer music festival near Peoria, more than 30 people were arrested for apparent possession of varied drugs, so availability doesn’t appear to be much of a challenge.

The known costs of our present policy are major, to say the least. We have destabilized at least two countries, Colombia and now violent Mexico, because of efforts by cartels down there to meet the demand for drugs here in the U.S.

Further, about one-third of the million or so persons in our prisons nationally, mostly African-American young men, are there for non-violent possession and distribution of drugs. When I was a state legislator in the 1970s, there were 8,000 inmates in Illinois prisons; now there are almost 50,000, yet I don’t think human nature has changed that much.

The costs of incarceration for drug infractions, at \$30,000 or so per inmate per year, would run into the billions nationally. Maybe, however, the costs of opening up use of drugs to the public would incur even greater costs. I don’t know, nor does anyone, to my knowledge.

I don't think I have ever seen or heard about a rigorous cost-benefit analysis of our drug policies, a type of analysis that is conducted routinely in the public policy arena. Let's have a national commission do the research and start the conversation.