

LEGALIZATION OF CANNABIS IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Mr. Speaker, our residents have demonstrated that cannabis is an important issue for them. Since I last spoke of the legalization of cannabis in May, our government has been hard at work undertaking an extensive engagement program with the public and stakeholders to make sure we understand the views of Northerners.

Our engagement, which formally began in July, has included public meetings in regional centres and select small communities. Seven public meetings have been held to date, with two more scheduled for today and tomorrow in Hay River and Behchoko. An online survey has also been made available to provide residents with the opportunity to make their views known.

Additionally, we have written directly to 120 key stakeholders such as community governments, Indigenous governments and nongovernmental organizations, to seek their views on the proposed principles and related issues. In our engagement we have been asking specific questions relating to issues such as the legal age for consumption, public smoking of cannabis, possession limits, community restriction options and possible retail models.

Mr. Speaker, we have seen an unprecedented level of response to our public engagement. To date, the online survey has received over 1,100 responses, with representation coming in from all regions of the Northwest Territories. In our community meetings we have seen strong turnout and thoughtful and insightful commentary, with members of our interdepartmental working group reporting that they have learned something new at each session.

As a government we are committed to making sure that effective measures are in place to promote the health and safety of our people and our communities, and we value the input of Northerners on the best ways to do it. An initial look at the survey responses we have received so far has shown that there is strong consensus on certain issues, but that public opinion is divided on other questions. With this in mind, I want to encourage residents who have not yet shared their opinions on this important topic to take part in our public engagement meetings online survey which will close on September 22. After that we will be hard at work producing a “what we heard” report which will be shared with Members and the public later this fall. This will still give us the time we need to incorporate feedback into the legislative planning which will proceed over the fall and winter.

We know the federal timelines for cannabis legalization are very short and we will have to work efficiently to be ready for July 2018.

The legalization of cannabis is a complex issue that touches on many areas, and it requires a coordinated response from many departments, agencies and other stakeholders. It is no secret that the Northwest Territories faces challenges in addressing addictions and abuse of alcohol and drugs. The use of tobacco, alcohol and cannabis in the NWT is considerably higher than the national average. Our residents understand those challenges, which can be seen through the outstanding response and participation in our public engagement thus far.

I would like to express my gratitude to all those that have taken the time to make their views known, and to my colleagues in this House for encouraging their constituents to make their views on cannabis known through our survey and participation at public meetings. I am sure that we will have many more discussions about how to regulate cannabis as specific plans and legislative initiatives are developed and brought forward for consideration over the fall and winter.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.