Is Travel & Tourism Going to Pot?

By Dr. Richard Kelley

One of the basic driving forces in Travel & Tourism is the desire of travelers to see or experience something they cannot find or do at home. It could be geography – those who live on the plains or in the mountains often want to travel to the seashore. Some are looking for a different culture and cuisine – Americans visiting China, Japanese traveling to Paris, Scandinavians vacationing in Thailand, etc.

Colorado has recently begun offering visitors another type of “different” experience. Since that state’s quasi-legalization of marijuana took effect on January 1, a number of new visitors are traveling to the Centennial State. They are looking forward to openly purchasing and, with some restrictions, openly using cannabis products, something they can’t do at home. Before we in Hawai‘i ask the Legislature to follow Colorado down that path, as some wish to do, let’s look at some important facts about marijuana and take the time needed to learn from Colorado’s experience.

First of all, the sale, possession and use of marijuana products is not completely legal, even in Colorado. Under federal law, cannabis is listed in Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act, the most tightly restricted category reserved for drugs that have “no currently accepted medical use.” Marijuana raids by the federal Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) have continued across the nation, but they have recently been reduced in states that have a clear licensing process for “medical marijuana.” Rob Kampia, writing in Philly.com, says, “Given President Obama’s flip-flops on marijuana policy, people have reason to be skeptical” about what will happen next.

In the United States, 20 states, including Hawai‘i, plus the District of Columbia, have authorized the use of marijuana for medical purposes. There is no question in my mind that there are many legitimate medical uses for marijuana. Dr. Lester Grinspoon, associate professor of psychiatry emeritus at Harvard Medical School, who has been studying marijuana since 1967, has eloquently put that concept forth in a number of publications, countless speeches and two websites.1, 2 In a two-minute YouTube video clip, Dr. Grinspoon describes how cannabis dramatically reduced nausea and vomiting when his 10-year old son was treated for acute lymphocytic leukemia.3

However, in a recent edition of the Wall Street Journal, Dr. Mitchell S. Rosenthal pointed out many of the dangers of marijuana, particularly for adolescents. He wrote: “Marijuana impairs learning, judgment and memory. … [Northwestern University] researchers … have found lasting changes in ‘working memory,’ brain structures critical to memory and reasoning. … [Yet,] barely 40 percent of adolescents now believe regular [marijuana] use is harmful – down from 80 percent two decades ago.

1, 2

Location of licensed recreational (green) and medical (red) marijuana outlets in central Colorado

(Credit: The Cannabist)
… Now marijuana is becoming more widely regarded as a harmless amusement. That’s not funny, it’s tragic."  

Implementing rules and regulations for the sale of “recreational” marijuana in Colorado is proving extremely challenging. Almost every day, local news outlets, including the Denver Post’s specialty publication, The Cannabist, report on the many issues involved. Should people on government assistance be allowed to buy the products in a marijuana shop? Can a homeowners’ association ban the possession or use of cannabis in its condominium building or housing clusters? You are supposed to consume marijuana in private – does that include your private but unfenced front lawn next to a public street or sidewalk? Can you take marijuana with you through the airport? How about in a national park? On ski slopes? Are there tests to determine if a person controlling an automobile, truck, watercraft, even a bus or light rail vehicle is “driving under the influence” (DUI)?

There are currently about 120 marijuana shops open or about to open in Colorado, most in the Denver area. Three new tour companies are taking visitors to these shops and cannabis-growing areas to compare prices and varieties. One company uses a stretch limo where passengers can try the products they have just purchased. Possible marketing slogan for one of these entrepreneurial spirits: “This bud’s for you!”

Colorado collects a 25 percent tax on sales of recreational cannabis products and predicts its annual revenue will total over $75 million.

In Hawai‘i, as the state Legislature opened this week, Speaker of the House Joe Souki, who opposes outright decriminalization of “recreational” marijuana as in Colorado, called for the adoption of a measure – yet to be spelled out in proposed legislation – that would allow the legal purchase of medical marijuana, something that is missing from current Hawai‘i law. (The paradox is that when Hawai‘i legalized medical marijuana in 2000, no mechanism was created for its legal purchase. Under current law, therefore, those who have a prescription for medical marijuana must either purchase it illegally “on the street” or grow it themselves.)

David Nixon, an associate professor at the University of Hawai‘i College of Social Sciences Public Policy Center, estimates that decriminalizing recreational marijuana could save taxpayers $9 million a year in law enforcement costs, and if it were taxed, bring in another $11 million in annual revenue. Based on Colorado’s experience of the past three weeks, decriminalizing marijuana would also give a boost to Travel & Tourism, at least initially.

However, given marijuana’s significant, well-documented dangers to adolescents, before the people of Hawai‘i dramatically change the life of our community by decriminalizing recreational marijuana, as was proposed in the Legislature last year (HB 699), we should watch what happens in Colorado for several years. Let’s learn from their experiences and only then decide what is the right thing to do.  

Web links to information cited above:
1. [http://rxmarijuana.com](http://rxmarijuana.com)
2. [http://marijuana-uses.com](http://marijuana-uses.com)
3. [http://tinyurl.com/ml7xbuh](http://tinyurl.com/ml7xbuh)
4. [http://tinyurl.com/jw6qx5k](http://tinyurl.com/jw6qx5k)
5. [www.thecannabist.com](http://www.thecannabist.com)
6. [http://tinyurl.com/qeghwnc](http://tinyurl.com/qeghwnc)