Citizens panel begins legal marijuana exploration

Seven experts with experience in marijuana policy, including legal, medical and business types, will help a group of 20 Massachusetts voters dive headfirst into the debate over the marijuana legalization ballot question in order to give fellow voters easy to understand information on the initiative.

The experts, including two officials who work directly with Colorado’s legal marijuana industry, will be questioned by the 20-voter panel of the Citizens’ Initiative Review (CIR), a pilot program designed to produce pro and con statements about the ballot question that could be easily digested by average voters.

The group of 20 Massachusetts voters, selected to closely match the demographics of the state electorate, will meet for four days this week, beginning Monday, to hold something of a public hearing on the ballot question, inviting testimony from supporters, opponents and the policy experts.

The panel will not endorse a yes or no vote on the question, but instead strive to give voters as much unvarnished information as possible in the form of pro and con statements that will be distributed statewide immediately following the end of the deliberations.

The CIR is a pilot program sponsored by Rep. Jonathan Hecht, the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University and Healthy Democracy, which implemented a similar citizens’ initiative review system in Oregon in 2011.

"Our goal with the CIR pilot project is to present as much information as possible to a group of engaged voters who represent the voter base of our state," Hecht said in a statement. "With the participation of the campaigns on both sides of the issue, as well as nationally-recognized experts, we believe that the voter panel will have a wealth of knowledge from which to draft a citizens’ statement that will aid voters in making an informed decision."

The group of experts, according to the CIR, includes: Ashley Kilroy, executive director of marijuana policy for the City and County of Denver; Andrew Freedman, director of the Governor's Office of Marijuana Coordination in Colorado; John Hudak, senior fellow in governance studies and deputy director of the Center for Effective Public Management at the Brookings Institute; Richard McGowan, associate professor of the practice in finance at Boston College; Sean Kealy, clinical associate professor of law at Boston University Law School; Staci Gruber, director of marijuana investigations for neuroscientific discovery and Cognitive and Clinical Neuroimaging Core at McLean Hospital; and Jeffrey Samet, section chief of general internal medicine at Boston Medical Center.

Representatives from the pro-legalization campaign -- Yes on 4 -- and the anti-legalization campaign -- The Campaign for a Safe and Healthy Massachusetts -- will also answer questions from the voter panel.

Led by professional moderators, the group will meet from Aug. 25 through Aug. 28 at the Atrium School in Watertown.
The deliberations are open to the public.

The voter panel was selected using an "objective, scientific method" and the group includes "includes women and men from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, Democrats, Republicans and unenrolled voters in the same proportions as the electorate as a whole," according to CIR organizers.

Question 4 would impose a 3.75 percent state excise tax on retail marijuana sales, allow adults 21 and older to possess up to an ounce of marijuana in public, and establish a Cannabis Control Commission to oversee the new industry, among other provisions.

Marijuana advocates have had marked success taking marijuana reform efforts directly to the voters. Possession of less than an ounce of pot was decriminalized by voters in 2008 and four years later voters handily approved the medical use of marijuana. In both years, organized opposition to the ballot measures was almost non-existent.

But this year, the opposition is backed by Gov. Charlie Baker, Boston Mayor Martin Walsh and House Speaker Robert DeLeo, and is being coordinated by former aides to Baker and Attorney General Maura Healey, who also opposes marijuana legalization.