

Authorities raid 247 Colorado homes growing black market pot

By DAN ELLIOTT
Associated Press

DENVER — Authorities said Friday they raided hundreds of black market marijuana operations in Colorado that flouted the state's cannabis law by growing tens of thousands of plants in Denver-area homes and selling the drugs out of state.

Investigators seized more than 80,000 plants and 4,500 pounds of harvested

marijuana, state and federal prosecutors said at a news conference. Officers raided 247 homes and eight businesses and arrested 42 people in Denver and seven nearby counties.

State law allows up to 12 marijuana plants per residence for personal use, but some of the homes had more than 1,000 and many had hundreds, U.S. Attorney Jason Dunn said.

Colorado and nine other states have broadly legal-

ized marijuana use but it remains illegal under federal law. That has created tension between some state and federal officials.

But George Brauchler, district attorney for the south and east Denver suburbs, stressed the investigation was a joint state-federal operation, not the U.S. Department of Justice imposing its will on Colorado.

"Make no mistake, we are equal partners in this,"

Brauchler said.

State and federal officials said the nearly three-year investigation showed that illegal marijuana trafficking mushroomed after voters approved recreational use in 2012.

Dunn said Colorado has become the epicenter for a nationwide black market in marijuana.

Brauchler warned that Colorado is becoming "the wild West of weed." He said the provision in the

law that allows small-scale home marijuana cultivation opened the door to big, illegal operations.

Brauchler warned that other states considering allowing home marijuana plants could expect the same but added he was not trying to discourage them from doing so.

"I think states are entitled to do whatever they want," he said. "But they need to know the reality of this."

Mason Tvert, a spokes-

man for the Marijuana Policy Project, which advocates for decriminalizing marijuana, questioned how prosecutors know that Colorado's law attracted illegal growers.

"Did they conduct a survey of illegal marijuana cultivators to determine why they decided to operate where they did?" he said. "Are they able to know whether those operations existed prior to legalization or not?"

Port: McGrath also took aim at the Port Commission

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McGrath's damaging assessment of Knight's performance provides some vindication to critics of the executive director's leadership ability. Port Commissioner Bill Hunsinger, in particular, has accused Knight of violating Port policy and overstepping his authority and has repeatedly said he should be fired.

Hunsinger, 74, was defeated in Tuesday's election by challenger Scott McClaine and his term ends in July.

"It might have cost me the election, but I was going to be 78 by the time I was done," he said.

Chinook Building

McGrath detailed several examples of what he sees as Knight's mismanagement of important matters, from the Port's pursuit of federal disaster relief money to the resolution of a lawsuit over the operation of the Astoria Riverwalk Inn.

McGrath claims Knight violated Port policy and overstepped his authority in backroom negotiations with local developer Chester Trabucco and his company, Marina Village LLC, on a lease for the Chinook Building next to the West Mooring Basin.

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Matt McGrath | recently resigned as director of operations at the Port of Astoria

The Port Commission approved a lease with Marina Village in September 2017 for more than \$6,300 a month. McGrath claims Trabucco began underpaying by about \$2,000 a month after striking a "gentleman's agreement" with Knight to base rent on receipts rather than the original terms. Neither staff nor the Port Commission were notified of the change, McGrath wrote to the Port Commission.

"I have also mentioned to you previously that I don't want to touch the Marina Village, LLC/Chinook Building issue because it is a lawsuit waiting to happen," he wrote to Knight in February.

Trabucco has said the rents on the Chinook Building were adjusted when he terminated the lease following a three-month due diligence period, during which he found more than \$500,000 in upgrades needed to the building. The developer claims he acted as a pass-through after the termination, collecting rents on behalf of the Port and pay-

ing the \$4,800 monthly rent to the Port, while waiting for Knight to act on a term sheet he delivered.

Trabucco was relieved of his role at the Chinook Building in October. He has expressed frustration at the lack of responsiveness from Knight, along with the Port's intent to sell the Chinook Building in a package with the adjacent Riverwalk Inn and former Seafare Restaurant without considering his term sheet.

Tacit endorsement

McGrath also took aim at the Port Commission, which oversees Knight.

"Sadly, my observation is that the commission tacitly endorses the executive director's dishonesty, incompetence and inability to complete a task," he wrote.

Days after a jury found Knight had made fraudulent statements to a suitor for the Riverwalk Inn, the Port Commission voted 3-2 to extend Knight's contract for three years, giving him

a pay package of more than \$200,000 annually, including benefits. The contract includes two one-year extension options that could take Knight through 2022.

Spence, Commissioner James Campbell and Commissioner Robert Stevens voted for the extension. Hunsinger and Commissioner Dirk Rohne voted against the move. Rohne wanted a rolling contract subject to annual performance reviews.

While he didn't always agree with Hunsinger's tactics, Rohne shared many of his concerns about Knight's management. Rohne also referred to the conclusions of an ad-hoc finance committee, which found the Port is in a dire financial situation and needs to build credibility with other governments and the public.

"I was hoping we could have an investigation, and a third party could talk with other staff, see if the accusations made by McGrath are systemic," Rohne said.

Astoria: City Council extended contracts with former city planners

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increasing the possible salary range from \$85,185 to \$103,543 to \$89,239 to \$108,470.

Estes hopes the increase to the salary range will attract new candidates, including those who may have been hesitant to apply because of pay. In working with Prothman, Estes was told the range the city had been offering was low and the city might want to consider a more competitive salary.

"It has been difficult to attract fully qualified candidates who meet the unique requirements of the city of Astoria within the current salary range and to allow for increases," Susan Brooks, the city's finance director, noted in a memo to city councilors.

The City Council also extended contracts with former city planners Rosemary Johnson and Mike Morgan and with Robin Scholetzky, of UrbanLens Planning. The consultants have been assisting on day-to-day planning activities, planning permits, code updates and special

projects.

Johnson's contract was at \$100,000; the increase approved on Monday brings the total to \$175,000. Morgan's contract was just below \$50,000 and was increased to \$75,000. Scholetzky's contract was \$30,000. The increase brings it up to \$45,000.

"I think this last process was a good process," Estes said about the recruitment of Sackett and Emmons. "We were presented with a great set of candidates. I'm hopeful that we will continue to get another good set of applicants."

He offered the job to a person he felt would have been a good fit for the city.

"We look at that as a success," he said. "Unfortunately, it did not work out for personal reasons."

Estes had held off on immediately replacing a city planning position, hoping to involve a new director. Now, he plans to go ahead and begin reviewing the applications he received and schedule interviews earlier than planned.

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