

**Statement by Seattle City Councilmember Tim Burgess before the
House Ways and Means Committee Regarding HB 1550
Legalization of Cannabis**

Wednesday, March 16, 2010

Chairman Hunter and committee members, my name is Tim Burgess. I am a member of the Seattle City Council and chair of the Council's Public Safety and Education Committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this important legislation.

I do not favor legalization of cannabis because I want to use marijuana. As we all know, the excessive use and abuse of drugs and alcohol, including marijuana, can create havoc for individuals and families and for our communities.

I favor legalization because I want to see a more rational, predictable and cost-effective response to drug use and to crime. Continuing to prohibit adult possession and use of small amounts of cannabis and then using our police officers and the powers of the criminal justice system to enforce this prohibition is not rational and it is not cost-effective.

There is a larger challenge that we face in our country today: America's decades-long policy of mass incarceration. While this legislation won't solve this larger challenge, I believe it's important to set this discussion squarely in its context.

Today, the United States is the world's largest jailer. We incarcerate more people on a per capita basis than any other country in the world. No other country comes even close to our rate of imprisonment. Think of your worst dictator, worst authoritarian regime, we imprison more of our people on a per capita basis than they do.

I was a Seattle police officer in the 1970s when mass incarceration took hold as our country's response to crime. It was driven primarily by the so-called "war on drugs." But even those with differing views on how illegal drugs should be handled must acknowledge that our policy of mass incarceration is not worthy of us as Americans.

Mass incarceration as public policy has a terribly damaging impact that costs us dearly, both economically and socially. It's not sustainable because of the huge costs, it isn't fair or just, and it produces extremely negative consequences tied directly to the stigma of being a convicted felon. These consequences include lower chances of finding a meaningful job that can support a family, lower chances of finding housing, lower chances of becoming an active participant in our democracy.

Mass incarceration sustains poverty, strengthens racism, and is anti-family. It is a public policy that creates a class of people who have great difficulty functioning in society and for whom we will pay the price in high prison costs, high recidivism rates, and high poverty rates.

If our drug laws were shifted to a more rational approach based on abuse and addiction prevention and other public health considerations, we could save our limited dollars and instead focus on the criminals who cause substantial harm to our communities. Perhaps this legislation gives us the chance to start on this new path with a different approach to cannabis.

I'll close with a few statistics from my city. In 2003, Seattle voters directed that simple marijuana possession be the lowest priority of our police officers. Last year, City Attorney Pete Holmes stopped all prosecutions for simple possession. The sky has not fallen. Reported major crime continues to decline. Our Part I offenses—the most serious crimes—are at 40-year lows. Our misdemeanor bookings into the King County jail have declined 47% in the last 15 years, saving us nearly \$17 million in booking fees alone. These facts, I believe, give us solid evidence that alternative approaches to crime and incarceration can be effective to keep our people and neighborhoods safe.

The legislation before you today calls for a significant change; this change causes concern for many, I recognize that. But this is the kind of discussion we need to have. Continuing on our present course is not sustainable and, in my opinion, not in the best interests of the people of Washington State.