

Governor's Council votes unanimous: Pardon misdemeanor pot convictions

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BOSTON — Almost a month after Gov. Maura T. Healey proposed a blanket pardon for all misdemeanor marijuana possession convictions in Massachusetts, the Governor's Council voted unanimously last Wednesday to approve the plan.

The pardons are effective as of March 13 and date as far back as records are kept. There was no determination as to how the state would handle juvenile convictions, which are sealed once a teenager reaches age 18.

As they debated the matter, the councilors said the process should be as automatic as possible.

With the council's affirmative vote, residents can request and receive certificates of pardon after filling out an online form. The pardons would be noted on criminal records regardless of whether a resident requests the certificate, Healey said when she announced the proposal March 13.

It's not clear how many residents would receive pardons.

When Healey announced the pardon March 13, she described the action as applying to "hundreds of thousands" of people and said the approximate figure was "extrapolated" from data.

At an informational hearing prior to the council vote, Councilor Terrence Kennedy of Lynnfield asked Suffolk County District Attorney Kevin Hayden about the actual number of pardon recipients covered under the blanket action, noting that he heard the number "between 69,000 and 100,000" tossed around, and that Trial Court Chief Justice Heidi Brieger referred in a letter this week to "approximately 22,000 adult cases" contained in "electronic records."

"Don't you think we should be making more of an effort to find those other people and who they are? Most people that have a marijuana conviction don't know what's going on in this room today and never will," Kennedy said.

"They're not going to get on a portal and fill out a form to get a pardon document. They're not going to be writing on a job application that they've been pardoned. Because they're never going to know it unless we reach out somehow. Don't you think we should be doing more?"

"We should be doing as much as possible, I think," Hayden replied. "And I don't mean to be glib, but thankfully that's a problem I don't have to worry about. That's for the governor and probation office to worry about...We expressed this concern at the time that the issue was raised. It should be as automatic as possible."

Even as they commended the governor's action, some council members expressed hope the state would go further, such as extending the pardon to expungement, the wiping clean of any references to convictions on possession charges. Councilors noted that while the pardons would be noted, those convicted on possession charges would still have criminal records.

Another suggestion was that the state extend the blanket pardon to include selected convictions for possession with intent to distribute, especially if the quantity of marijuana was considered to be small.

Council member Terrence Kennedy of Lynnfield noted that residents can go to a dispensary and purchase marijuana in the same or higher quantity than what would have prompted a conviction for intent to distribute.

"It's not a crime anymore," Kennedy said.

Newton Police Chief John Carmichael, head of the Massachusetts Major Cities Chiefs of Police, differed.

"It's still a charge we can bring," Carmichael said, adding that possession is not.

Massachusetts decriminalized marijuana possession in 2008 and legalized it in 2016 through ballot initiatives, asking residents to decide the issue. Since then, the state has been home to a billion-dollar recreational and medicinal-use marijuana industry.

Rep. Carlos Gonzalez, D-Springfield, who is co-chair of the Public Safety Committee, said the blanket pardon would unburden those in his district who have been convicted on possession charges prior to legalization.

"This will give them a chance to rebuild their lives," Gonzalez said. "This will create opportunities for them to contribute to their community and advance equity and justice. This indicates that Massachusetts believes in second chances."

With reports from State House News Service.



UMass Dartmouth students Mason Cabral and Mathieu Dundas help string together over 32,000 discarded nip bottles into a piece titled "Sculpture Monster: Creature from the Plasticine Era." The project is being led by UMD sustainability artist in residence Rebecca McGee Tuck. The "performative sculpture" will be marched by UMD students in the upcoming AHA! Night Earth Eve Procession in downtown New Bedford. PETER PEREIRA/THE STANDARD-TIMES

Sculpture

Continued from Page 1A

and take about 30 students to carry it," said Rebecca McGee Tuck, the artist brought on board by UMass Dartmouth to lead this project, given her specialty in making art out of waste to deliver environmental messages. Tuck said the piece — which she describes as depicting a long "sea serpent-like creature" made up of individual sections — will stand as a campus-wide UMass Dartmouth collaboration, with involvement from multiple departments.

"Think of something kind of in the vein of the dragons you see during Chinese New Year celebrations," Tuck said. "It won't look anything like that, but just to give you an idea of how it'll work..."

Beyond being a message about the amount of plastic waste found in communities and the environment, Tuck says the piece is also meant to garner support for Bill S.2104: An Act To Expand The Bottle Bill, which would expand what types of beverage containers are included in the state's recycling deposit system, and increase the deposit from five to 10 cents per container. Currently, state law calls for deposits only for carbonated beverages like soda or beer.

Tuck estimates the entire sculpture will weigh just under 700 pounds when complete.

Where did the nips come from?

The 32,885 nips were supplied by New Bedford-based grassroots group Be the Solution to Pollution, led by Mary Lou Nicholson. Nicholson says "a couple years ago" the group began storing the nip bottles volunteers would collect during cleanups of various local sites like the beaches of New Bedford, Fairhaven and Dartmouth. She said her group was graciously offered space at UMass Dartmouth's main campus to store the ever-growing collection, which came to include drop-offs from other environmental groups around the area.

Then, realizing how many nips had accumulated, Nicholson said it was decided the time had come to do something with them, and Tuck began brainstorming with UMD students and staff this past summer.

While Nicholson says she didn't make any specific requests of Tuck or anyone at UMD around design for the piece of art the nips would become, she knew she wanted it to be "ugly."

"I didn't want it to be some beautiful piece," Nicholson said via phone from the State House in Boston, where she'd been advocating for the bottle bill legislation on Tuesday. "This single-use plastic garbage is ugly and I want the message out there that we've gone way over the tipping point on this."

The real monster remains

While the sight of almost 33,000 nip bottles may be rightfully perceived as monstrous, Nicholson says it should be considered that this represents but a minute fraction of what remains out in local neighborhoods, parks, shorelines and waters.

"I have a volunteer who got a couple thousand just from Brooklawn Park, where there's signs that say 'no alcohol,'" Nicholson said.

DNA of the monster

Nicholson said she and other volunteers cataloged the 32,885 nip bottles that make up "Sculpture Monster: Creature from the Plasticine Era," find-

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ing the top three brands are:

1. Smirnoff (10,000)
2. Fireball (8,500)
3. Dr. McGillicuddy's (3,750)

Artist residency

After spending time around Greater New Bedford since work on the UMD project began in August, Tuck, a Natick resident, says she's taken a liking to the SouthCoast and has accepted an offer to be the artist-in-residence for the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park this summer.

"I've been loving the area," she said. "Most of my work is done with debris I collect along the ocean so I'm interested in areas with coastline."

"For my residency, I'll be doing a lot of work with weaving marine debris — ropes, traps and lines that wash ashore, ghost netting and things like that."

SouthCoast communities take stand against single-use plastic

Single-use plastic waste has been a hot issue in SouthCoast communities in recent years. Here are some of the local actions that have been taken.

New Bedford: City Licensing Board voted to ban nip sales in 2023. The ban would have taken effect on Nov. 1, 2023 but has been pushed back to Aug. 1, 2024. In January 2020, a city ordinance was signed banning single-use plastic shopping bags.

Fairhaven: Town Meeting voters in May 2023 voted for a bylaw change banning nip bottles from being sold in town. Changes also included a ban on "thin film" plastic shopping bags, Styrofoam food containers, and restrictions on items like plastic straws and stirrers.

Dartmouth: Dartmouth Town Meeting voted to ban businesses from distributing single-use plastic shopping bags back in 2018. The rule took effect in 2019.

Where to see the nip monster

The "Earth Eve Parade," featuring "Sculpture Monster: Creature from the Plasticine Era," starts at 5 p.m., Thursday, April 11, on Market Street next to the New Bedford Public Library. The procession will go along William Street, Acushnet Avenue, Union Street, and Pleasant Street.

The sculpture is set to make a second appearance on Saturday, April 20, at the "Light + Fashion 2024" event, 6:30 to 9 p.m., presented by the UMass Dartmouth College of Visual and Performing Arts.

Want to help clean up?

To find out about upcoming local cleanup events with Be the Solution to Pollution, visit and follow www.facebook.com/pollutionsolution, or www.instagram.com/marylou4oceans.

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS USA TODAY

Country star Wallen arrested after throwing chair, police say

Country music singer Morgan Wallen was arrested early Monday in Nashville, Tennessee, on felony charges after police say he threw a chair from a downtown rooftop for "no legitimate purpose."

Wallen, 30, was booked into jail on three counts of reckless endangerment and one count of disorderly conduct in connection with the incident late Sunday night, the Metro Nashville Police Department reported.

According to an arrest affidavit obtained by USA TODAY, at 10:53 p.m. local time, two police officers were standing in front of Chief's Bar in the city's entertainment district on Lower Broadway when they saw a chair fall from above and hit the street about three feet from them.

Video footage of incident showed him "lunging and throwing an object off the roof," the affidavit says.

Chief's Bar, owned by country music singer Eric Church, is a six-story building.

'Just married!': Don Lemon, Tim Malone share wedding pics

They're married! Don Lemon and Tim Malone made it Instagram official, sharing a "Just married!" photo on Saturday night, five years to the day after their engagement. In it, the two tuxedo-clad grooms are exiting a church, wearing big smiles and holding their three dogs, who wear tux-like, bow-tied collars.

Video shared in Lemon's and Malone's Instagram Stories shows guests forming a second line behind the couple and waving blue handkerchiefs as they head to a wedding reception at Ralph Lauren's Polo Bar.

Former CNN news anchor Lemon, 58, and his real-estate broker husband wed in New York City in a ceremony attended by 140 guests, according to People. The wedding at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan was officiated by Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

The couple had a "beautiful wedding," Lemon's representative, Allison Gollust, told USA TODAY on Sunday. "They are thrilled."

On way to CMT awards, Jelly Roll's plane makes emergency landing

Jelly Roll and his wife, Bunnie XO, were en route to Austin, Texas, before the CMT Awards when his private jet had to make an emergency landing amid technical issues.

The country singer, known for his hits "Need A Favor" and "Save Me," and his wife safely arrived for Sunday night's awards show.

Bunnie XO, a podcast host and internet personality, documented the couple's travels on her Instagram and TikTok. Afterward, she described the whole ordeal as "scary" on social media.

Jelly Roll said he was told it was a problem with the plane's computer.

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