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L.A. officials propose fees for medical marijuana dispensaries

Ordinance governing pot sales cannot take effect until the City Council approves the fees.

By John Hoeffel

Filling in the last blank in the city's medical marijuana ordinance, Los Angeles officials Friday recommended a number of fees dispensaries would have to pay to operate. Although the City Council passed the law in January, it cannot take effect until the council approves the fees.

In addition to standard charges for inspections and research, officials have proposed special fees that would total about \$1,200 for a manager registering an existing dispensary.

Councilman Ed Reyes said he hopes to send the proposal straight to the council to speed up the process.

Even so, the ordinance is unlikely to take effect until May, almost a year after the uncontrolled spread of pot shops outraged neighborhood activists and spurred the council to move on the languishing issue.

The ordinance is needed to give city officials the power to crack down on dispensaries, Reyes said, adding that the council's attention has shifted.

"The spotlight seems to have dimmed," he said.

Medical marijuana advocates said the proposed fees sounded reasonable.

"They got one thing right," said Yamileth Bolanos, a dispensary operator who is president of the Greater Los Angeles Collectives Alliance and who has sued the city over the controversial ordinance.

Reyes said he was surprised the amount was so low and promised to examine whether it reflects the city's costs, adding that employees may have to work overtime to register the dispensaries.

Under the proposal, applicants would pay the Los Angeles Police Department \$151 each to perform criminal background checks to ensure they have not been convicted of a felony in the last 10 years.

Each would have to pay \$324 to the city clerk to review the registration and \$688 to the Building

and Safety Department for pre-inspection. Every three months, each would be required to update the registration and pay \$140 to the department.

The proposed fees are low compared to those in other major cities.

San Francisco, for example, charges \$8,470 for an application permit and \$3,933 for a license and reinspection.

The city report also recommends that the ordinance be revised to require dispensary managers to submit completed background checks at the same time as their registrations.

The report notes that it can take six to eight weeks to complete that process and recommends notifying dispensary operators to start right away.

Joe Elford, the chief counsel for Americans for Safe Access, a medical marijuana advocacy group that has sued Los Angeles over its ordinance, questioned how the council could require that before the law is in effect.

Reyes said he was puzzled by that proposal and promised to look into it.