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Pot breaks the age barrier

Legalization might be a bigger issue for boomers than for others.

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Its name might be its strongest asset: The Regulate, Control and Tax Cannabis Act, a marijuana legalization effort that goes out of its way not to say the word "marijuana."

I suspect its organizers learned something from the failure of predecessors -- like the Inalienable Rights Enforcement Initiative, a name that sounds like it was dreamed up by a bunch of guys passing around a bong.

The Cannabis Act, which qualified last week for the statewide November ballot, ran its first radio ad Sunday: a former Los Angeles deputy sheriff explaining "why cops support Tax Cannabis 2010, the initiative to control and tax cannabis."

Never mind that the state's law enforcement organizations are already lining up to oppose it.

Supporters, bankrolled so far by an Oakland marijuana dispensary owner, plan to spend as much as \$20 million to convince California voters that legalizing marijuana will help solve the state's budget woes and blunt the reach of drug cartels.

The initiative would move the battle over marijuana modestly forward by making it legal for anyone 21 and older to possess an ounce of marijuana and/or grow whatever can fit in a 5-by-5-foot plot. It would allow cities and counties to decide whether to allow sales and tax the proceeds.

That feels to me like a natural progression of California's cannabis policy, which essentially decriminalized possession 35 years ago -- an ounce gets you a \$100 fine -- and in 1996 deemed pot to be medication.

The premise of the proposed law: Marijuana has more in common with alcohol and tobacco than with heroin and cocaine.

Or: Is there much really much difference between going home and smoking a joint and going home to a glass of Merlot?

Polls suggest that mothers in their 30s and 40s -- who are likely to have teenagers at home -- might side with law enforcement against the proposal. I understand that reflexively. It's hard to

say yes at the ballot box when you've spent years telling your kids to "just say no" to marijuana.

But the reality is that any 18-year-old with a hankering for pot and \$100 can head to Venice Beach and be legally smoking within an hour.

Acne, anxiety, an ankle sprain -- virtually any ailment qualifies for treatment with medical marijuana.

"It's easier now [for 18-year-olds] to get cannabis than booze," said Dale Sky Clare, spokeswoman for the cannabis campaign. "Our current policies have failed to keep cannabis away from our kids or to educate them about the dangers of dependence."

She's confident that moms will come around once "we make sure they understand your next-door neighbor is not allowed to turn into a grow operation. . . . And no more back-alley deals. You'll have a retail facility, someone who has a license -- and can lose it if they sell to your underage child."

What about all those studies that say pot is getting stronger and more dangerous? I asked.

That's fear-mongering by opponents, Clare said.

"We've got science on our side. And our studies kick their studies' ass."

If moms are going to be the naysayers, I figured young people would be the initiative's biggest supporters. So I spent this spring break weekend chatting with my daughters and their friends, from 19-year-olds to mid-20s.

They weren't as enthused as I'd expected. Most everyone knows somebody with a cannabis card.

"The kids who want it can get it," my 19-year-old daughter told me. On campus, it's hard to avoid it.

It turns out that while pot smoking is dropping among teens, it's rising among baby boomers. Ten years ago, one in 20 pot smokers was in my demographic -- between 50 and 59 years old. Now the number is one in 10. And as we age -- and kids move out -- the number seems to grow.

Drug policy experts say baby boomers have more invested in legalization because they are less likely to embrace risky options. They don't have a street connection or want to wind up listed on a dispensary's log.

Still, they know that a little weed might make you feel young and giggle a lot, but it isn't going to ruin your life.

Like it or not, their children know they know. A 20-year-old I spoke with was stunned when she went with her mother to an Eagles concert and saw "all the old people lighting up." My daughter told me she and her friends were once approached by an elderly woman in a beach parking lot who implored: "Do you have a joint? . . . Please . . . my husband is making me crazy."

And young people who confessed to pinching a bud from their parents' stash years ago now worry the old man is raiding theirs.

Maybe it's time we stopped pretending there's nothing odd about the fact that every gas station and liquor store has a giant display of Zig-Zag papers for something we're not allowed to roll, and "smoke shops" can sell water pipes if we all pretend that they're for tobacco.

Come November, we'll see if a state too strait-laced to let gay people marry is open-minded enough to let us all toke.