By Amy Sylvestri

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A standing-room-only crowd gathered at the Senior Community Center Tuesday night to discuss the possibility of medical marijuana dispensaries coming to San Leandro.

Over 40 speakers shared their thoughts, and the crowd was pretty evenly spilt between those in favor of allowing the pot shops under strict guidelines and those that didn't want them in town.

Since medical marijuana was legalized in California, the city has had a series of temporary moratoriums on dispensaries within the city. But last summer, a lawsuit against the county of Los Angeles prevented outright banning dispensaries. That made the city attorney recommend that San Leandro make rules about the dispensaries rather than risk being sued.

Assistant City Attorney Richard Pio Roda outlined the ordinance that the city is considering. It would allow for two dispensaries in San Leandro, which could sell pot and marijuana edibles to those with prescriptions.

The dispensaries could operate between the hours of 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. and only be in commercial areas at least 1,000 feet away from the other dispensary, schools, libraries, and parks and 500 feet away from any residence. The acceptable sites were largely in the industrial area.

Police Chief Sandra Spagnoli said that medical marijuana facilities have been linked to higher crime rates in other cities. She said the Black Friday 2011 shooting at the Hesperian Walmart was related to marijuana and that fires often occur at marijuana growing facilities.

One speaker pointed out that the crimes Spagnoli mentioned were result of illegal marijuana and that accessible medical marijuana could prevent those crimes. He also said there are reports such as the RAND report that refute the statistics Spagnoli shared.

A contingency from the Heritage Baptist Church all took turns speaking out against allowing the dispensaries, including pastor Alan Fong, who said it would negatively impact people's opinions of the city.

Alan Wang asked how the city hopes to attract tech businesses with dispensaries in town and said the facilities would take up city resources like police patrols.

Another member of the church said that people come to San Leandro for “hope not dope.”

The meeting was a public forum, so the City Council didn’t take a vote, but did offer comment. Councilman Jim Prola said the bans the city has been operating under don’t work. Mayor Stephen Cassidy said he was in favor of adopting the proposed ordinance.

Other public speakers in favor of allowing the dispensaries were individuals including a man whose 92-year-old ailing mother benefited from medical marijuana cookies, a veteran who uses medical marijuana to combat post traumatic stress disorder, and a retired parole officer who said alcohol had a much more negative effect on her clients.

“I’ve never seen someone smoke pot and go out and try to get into a fight,” said Janet Jones. “They tend to stay home and just kick back.”

Speaker and union representative Dan Rush told the City Council “every drug dealer in town wants to see you have a ban” as legal pot would cut into their business.

“A regulated, transparent industry makes San Leandro safer and makes safe access for patents a reality,” said Rush. “A ban doesn’t mean the removal of marijuana, it means it moves it to the shadows.”