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## SF's 'green rush' for new cannabis stores — and a growing opposition

By J.K. Dineen

The small Leland Avenue commercial corridor in San Francisco's Visitacion Valley neighborhood has two nail salons, two dry cleaners, three convenience stores and a couple of Chinese bakeries.

Pretty soon it could have two medical marijuana dispensaries, as well.

In a trend that is fueling land-use fights in neighborhoods across the city, working-class Visitacion Valley has become the latest focus for cannabis entrepreneurs looking to take advantage of the so-called "green rush" that gained momentum after California voters last year approved Proposition 64, which legalized the recreational use of marijuana.

While the city has set a Sept. 1 deadline to determine how recreational cannabis will be regulated, many investors are betting those regulations will include a mechanism to convert medical pot shops into recreational outlets.

In January, the Planning Commission approved a dispensary in the commercial corridor at 2442 Bayshore Blvd., despite a large number of residents speaking out against it. On Thursday, the commission will decide the fate of a second cannabis outlet at 5 Leland Ave., just 259 feet away and around the corner from the first.

The possible pairing of two dispensaries at the gateway to a low-income, largely immigrant community has prompted significant neighborhood opposition. Visitacion Valley residents say the dispensaries will take prime real estate at the entrance to the neighborhood's small retail district and will be incompatible with several youth-serving organizations nearby.

Marlene Tran, a retired public school teacher and neighborhood activist who has lived in Visitacion Valley since 1980, said, "What the neighborhood needs is opportunities for our youth and businesses that benefit our youth." That the 5 Leland Ave. project would occupy two retail storefronts — a former 99-cent store and convenience store — is a waste of prime space, she said.

“We have a lot of needs in this community — maybe a clothing store, a bookstore, stores for children, sporting goods,” she said. “Things that we can all patronize. Having a mini-mall (medical cannabis dispensary) at the entrance to our commercial district will not benefit most people.”

San Francisco now has 36 such dispensaries, a number that is set to skyrocket: The Planning Department is processing applications for 25 more dispensaries. And for every would-be dispensary owner who applies, another is exploring sites.

Since the beginning of 2016, the Planning Department’s zoning administrator has received requests from 24 property owners looking for “letters of determination” on whether a dispensary would be a legal use at a particular site. Of the 24 potential sites, the city determined that eight of them were suitable.

“There is a green rush going on — people are staking their claim,” Planning Commissioner Dennis Richards said. “To have the number of (medical cannabis dispensaries) almost double is kind of insane.”

The city’s 2005 medical cannabis legislation created a “green zone” where outlets are allowed. Those regulations excluded many neighborhoods and precluded dispensaries from opening within 1,000 feet of youth-serving establishments such as recreation centers, schools and community centers. The 1,000-foot limit eliminates many neighborhoods from consideration. This year, four dispensary applicants have been turned away from proposed sites that would be within 1,000 feet of the Mission Pool and Playground on Valencia Street.

But Visitacion Valley residents say that the 1,000-foot rule is being applied unevenly. The city ruled that youth-serving organizations near 5 Leland Ave. — the Asian Pacific American Community Center and the Cross Cultural Family Center — did not qualify as “primarily serving persons under 18 years of age.” The Cross Cultural Family Center provides child care services.

Attorney Teresa Li, representing neighbors trying to stave off the dispensaries, pointed to the city’s rejection of applications for several other spots, including 865 Post St., which is near a youth center and a preschool.

“There is a double standard,” Li said. “Why is it OK to open a (dispensary) on Leland Avenue next to a child-care facility but not on Post Street? That is why we are seeing a concentration of (dispensaries) in low-income, minority neighborhoods. Our children don’t seem to matter as much.”

Quentin Platt, who is part of the group that wants to open the Leland Avenue dispensary, said poorer areas like Visitacion Valley deserve the same access to medical cannabis as wealthier parts of town like the Castro, Marina or Financial District neighborhoods.

“Legalized cannabis is an opportunity to stop criminalizing people of color and start creating opportunities in a safe, exciting new industry,” he said.

The store will create at least 15 jobs and plans to hire directly from the neighborhood as much as possible, he said. Having two dispensaries would translate into “more choices and better prices for patients who depend on cannabis to help them treat diseases like HIV, glaucoma and cancer.”

Medical cannabis advocates point to studies showing that medical dispensaries do not increase crime and that the increased foot traffic and security tend to have the opposite effect.

Medical cannabis patient and advocate David Goldman said Visitacion Valley should embrace the industry.

”They should be thrilled. There is not much going on in that neighborhood,” Goldman said. “They could use a few more businesses. When I go to a new dispensary, I always plan something else in the neighborhood — I go to the stores, I eat in the restaurants.”

Longtime resident Russel Morine, who used to own a cafe across the street from 5 Leland, said the high rent that dispensaries can pay is “skewing the marketplace” in a way that will lead to higher asking rents for other neighborhood properties.

“There is a lot of irrational exuberance at work,” he said. “They see the cheap rents and that it is close to Brisbane and San Mateo County,” where there are no dispensaries. And, “they can pay whatever the landlord is asking.”