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Medical marijuana discussion not over

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State Rep. Kenny Yuko hears some jokes about his support for medical marijuana.

People ask if his bill has "joint" sponsors or make Cheech and Chong references.

But Yuko, D-Richmond Heights, is not joking about an issue which he thinks can improve the quality of life for certain people.

"No 'que pasas.' No George Carlin routines. We're serious about it," he said.

Yuko, who has Multiple Sclerosis, has been interested in the potential of medical marijuana since he was inducted into the Multiple Sclerosis Hall of Fame in 2007. While in Dallas for the inductions, several

people talked to him about medical marijuana and he started to feel it had some real, legitimate benefits.

Since that time, Michigan has legalized medical marijuana. It joins 12 other states that allow marijuana to be prescribed for pain, nausea, vomiting and other symptoms caused by diseases such as multiple sclerosis, epilepsy and cancer.

Michigan is the first of Ohio's border states to pass a medical marijuana law, though both Pennsylvania and Illinois have bills for consideration in their legislature.

Meanwhile, there has been almost no traction for a similar law in Ohio. A bill legalizing medical cannabis was proposed in 2008 and abandoned after little debate.

Its sponsor — Sen. Tom Roberts, D-Trotwood — has since left the Senate.

Yuko said language was recently submitted to draft a new bill, similar to Roberts' proposal, and Ed Orlett, a former lawmaker who is the state representative for the Drug Policy Alliance, is helping draft it.

Yuko hopes to see a ballot initiative in the next few years.

"There's more people pulling for us than fighting us," he said, adding "people said we'd never see a casino bill in Ohio and that happened."

A poll by the University of Cincinnati said a majority of Ohioans would favor a medical marijuana law.

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In a poll of 818 adults by phone between April 16 and April 27, 73 percent of residents favored, either strongly or somewhat, allowing doctors to prescribe marijuana for medical reasons.

The poll also cited majorities in every demographic — age, race, religion and political party.

Bruce Mirken said medical marijuana is an issue that tends to be more popular with the public than politicians.

Mirken is a spokesman for the Marijuana Policy Project, an advocacy group that supported Michigan's ballot initiative.

The group is partly funded by an Ohio man — Peter Lewis, chairman of Progressive Corp. — but is not heavily involved in Ohio.

Mirken is less optimistic about a medical marijuana bill's chances in this state.

"It certainly doesn't feel like we're going to make progress right away," he said. "I hope to God I'm wrong, but I don't see it."

Mirken and Yuko both cited a

lack of unity among local advocacy groups as part of the reason there is no bill yet.

"There were multiple groups, and you'd think they have a single focus in mind, but that's not the case," Yuko said.

"There are different agendas, different personalities involved, and it's not simple to mold them all into one."

State Sen. Tim Grendell, R-Chester Township, said even if a medical marijuana bill passed in the House, whose majority is Democrats, it would not survive the predominantly Republican

Senate.

"I don't think the majority of senators are convinced there are enough safeguards in place to legalize medical marijuana," he said.

John E. Murphy, executive director of the Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association, said he had two reservations regarding medical marijuana.

"The main concern that prosecutors have is that this would be open to abuse," he said. "We're also not convinced there aren't suitable medical alternatives for pain relief."