



Davenport commission issues support for medical marijuana facility

By Mike Ferguson

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DAVENPORT — With the citrus industry struggling, the Davenport City Commission has its eyes on a new cash crop.

During Monday's meeting, the commission voted 5-0 to author a letter of support to the state to bring a medical marijuana cultivation facility to the Holly Hill citrus plant on U.S. 17/92. If approved by the state, members of the marijuana company Starbuds would be hired by the citrus company.

"You'll never know anything is happening inside by driving through there," said Warren McKnight, the owner of Holly Hill. "It's strictly for medical purposes."

The proposed plan would be to manufacture and distribute medical marijuana, but only to dispensaries owned by Starbuds. The state does not allow wholesaling of the product. The state is not currently issuing licenses for cultivation, but is set to allow four more as patient numbers grow.

"We're really in the compliance industry," said Michael "Caddy" Cadwell, chief success officer of Starbuds. "That's what this is all about."

The application, Cadwell said, is about 400 pages long. If approved by the state, the initial construction would be on 30,000 square feet at the site. The number of employees upon opening would be between 30 and 40.

"It's in our best interest to create as many jobs as quickly as possible," said Silver Gordon, Starbuds' director of security and development.

Cadwell and Gordon said the hope would be to expand the facility to between 150,000 and 200,000 square feet in three years and to bring the workforce to 100 at the site. The property is about 13 acres, allowing room for expansion, with the building already being more than 100,000 square feet.

“Certainly, they’re talking about cleaning that place up,” City Manager Kelly Callihan said. “Putting \$3 million into that facility increases the tax base.”

The issue most commonly raised among commissioners was safety. Gordon said the facility would be equipped with security fences and access codes would be required to get into the building. The state would do all background checks for prospective employees.

“Nothing would be outside or visible,” Gordon said. “There’s no exposure to the community with the product itself. The crime directed toward the industry is very little. Most of it is in the retail part.”

The low end of the pay scale for employees, Cadwell said, would be about \$15 per hour. The high end of the scale would be earned by doctorate holders with a concentration in botany.

“I have my reservations about all this,” Commissioner Tom Fellows said. “But I will be supporting this with some reservations.”

Initially, the company would grow about 200 plants per room using LED lighting. The facility would have eight rooms for growing to begin. Starbuds has no intentions to put a dispensary in Davenport, but the cultivation facility’s presence wouldn’t preclude anyone else from doing so.

“Warren’s facility needs some help,” Cadwell said. “This facility is perfect for what we want to do.”

Utilities director

The City Commission voted 5-0 Monday night to advertise a utilities director position. The position would pay \$65,000.

“At the rate our city is growing, we can no longer operate without a full-time utilities director,” Callihan said. “We currently have 22 residential developments we’re working with and two commercial. We see this as a need.”

Those duties have been handled by the public works department. Parks and recreation, stormwater and streets would still fall under that banner.

“It’s clear we need someone knowledgeable of our needs,” said Fellows, who serves as the city’s representative on the Polk Regional Water Cooperative. “We need someone who walks the walk and talks the utility talk.”

In other business, the commission voted 5-0 on Monday night to re-appoint Brynn Summerlin as vice mayor.

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