

Marijuana push is smoke and mirrors; dangers of legalization are real, says Sen. Chris Brown

Sen. Chris Brown For The Press

Do you believe a girl can transform into an ape right before your eyes? As a boy going to the Atlantic City Boardwalk in the '70s, I watched unsuspecting families part with their money after listening to carnies guaranteeing them a once in a lifetime opportunity. The best one was on the old Million Dollar Pier where carnies promised, if you just hand over your money, you will see a girl turn into a real live ape. But as I learned at an early age, thanks to smoke, mirrors and a second-hand gorilla suit, the carnies were selling an empty bag of goods.

Today, the carney-like promises — that we should just hand over our vote and legalize marijuana because it's harmless, there'll be an endless flow of cash to solve all of our problems, parents won't have to worry because large marijuana companies won't market to kids as they put drug dealers out of business — sound great from outside the tent. The question is, are these promises real or simply smoke and mirrors designed to get you into the tent?

So, before we enter the tent on a leap of faith to see if a girl can truly turn into an ape or if legalizing marijuana can live up to its promises, we should learn what's happening in states where recreational marijuana is already legal.

When we peek under the tent, we quickly see experts found out the hard way marijuana is not as harmless as promised. In Colorado they're experiencing a dramatic rise in marijuana-related emergency room visits due to both inhalation and edible use, while almost half of the children born at St. Mary-Corwin Medical Center had THC in their bloodstreams at birth. Moreover, marijuana-related traffic deaths rose 62 percent while law enforcement found increasingly potent levels of marijuana in positive-testing drivers who died in crashes. In Washington, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety reported fatal crashes involving marijuana doubled after legalization.

Researchers at Harvard and Northwestern universities found recreational marijuana smokers exhibited abnormalities in the shape, volume and density of certain areas of the brain. Other research shows chronic users are 60 percent less likely to complete high school, exhibit more negative moods, are at higher risk of heroin and alcohol addiction, and are seven times more likely to commit suicide. It's scary to learn that the most thorough study to date confirmed smoking high-potency marijuana increases the risk of psychosis.

Citing this research, every major medical association in New Jersey — the Medical Society, Nurses Association, the American Society of Addiction Medicine, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Cancer Society, the Mental Health Association, and American Heart Association — looked under the tent and concluded that “With the data on roadway dangers, negative effects on adolescent brain development and fetal development, risk of respiratory diseases and risk of other health conditions, we are compelled to oppose the legalization of recreational marijuana due to overwhelming public health concerns.”

Once the NJ Association of Chiefs of Police peeked under the tent, they found the black market still thrives across the country because it's cheaper to buy marijuana from a dealer who doesn't charge that pesky sales tax, and since dispensaries have limited hours and locations, users buy from dealers who deliver anytime, anywhere. School bus drivers, security guards and public safety workers often choose not to register at a legal dispensary in order to remain anonymous to keep their jobs.

The chiefs association concluded legalization of marijuana is not the answer for New Jersey because it "will further burden our public health care system, increase organized criminal activity, and affect the welfare of our most vulnerable — our youth and adolescent population."

As for the promise of an endless flow of cash, Massachusetts and California have the misfortune of missing their marijuana revenue projections by over a half a billion dollars. According to studies, taxes on recreational marijuana are neither a reliable nor a stable source of revenue.

With these overwhelming questions regarding our families' health and safety, combined with poor tax revenue raised in other states and the informed conclusions by medical and law enforcement experts, it's lucky for us the vote for recreational marijuana was canceled last month.

Without an open and honest conversation considering all of the facts, entering the tent based on a carney's promise may be tempting, but it's important to remember it may just be someone in a second-hand gorilla suit.

State Sen. Chris Brown, of Ventnor, is a Republican representing the 2nd District (nearly all of Atlantic County).