

- **Source: Syracuse New Times**

Publication Date: Oct. 27th , 2004

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Website: <http://newtimes.rway.com/2004/102704/shakin.shtml#0>

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## ***Just Say Whoa***

Seattle has saved thousands of dollars by revising its drug arrest policies and treating marijuana possession by individual users less harshly than traffic infractions. Nationally, people realize that Prohibition increased gangsterism and the murder rate, but are slow to apply the lesson to contemporary drug policy. Locally, according to Councilor-at-Large Stephanie Miner, folks aren't much concerned about neighbors smoking pot in the confines of their homes but are very concerned about the violence in their neighborhoods attributed to drug dealing on the street.

In his last official act as city auditor last year, Minch Lewis issued a report calling for an overhaul of the city's front on the war on drugs, calling current policies too expensive and counterproductive. Earlier this month recommendations from Lewis, Miner and the drug reform organization ReconsiDer launched a series of hearings before the Common Council's finance committee to examine cost-effective alternatives, the first such effort by a municipality in the country.

"It was a good opportunity to explore alternatives to our current policy," Lewis reflected on the Oct. 14 hearing. "This is a search for plan B. The data shows the current policy doesn't work. The numbers show that if we locked up twice as many people, we'd have twice as many new drug houses."

According to ReconsiDer activist Nicolas Eyle, the timing couldn't be better. "Change is in the air with regard to drug policy," he explained. "A few weeks ago the tough-on-crime, lock-em-up incumbent Albany District Attorney Paul Clyne suffered a stunning defeat in the Democratic primary at the hands of his opponent {David Soares} who campaigned on a platform centered around repeal of the Rockefeller drug laws. News from Chicago tells us they are seriously considering replacing arrest and jail with fines for marijuana offenses. Syracuse's hearings will be a model for the nation on what municipalities can do to improve the safety of the community and save money in the process."

"The costs aren't in the city budget," Lewis clarified. "If we changed the policy, ended up doing other things, we would be spending money, but it would be effective rather than wasted. The cost is to the neighborhoods, which we are destroying now and could save with alternative policies. It costs a fortune, \$35,000 a year, to lock somebody up. It would take extensive research to come up with a specific figure, but a treatment plan would cost a whole lot less. Plus, locking people up destroys lives, which would be saved, including the lives of our police who are placed in danger by enforcing the current laws."

Repealing the laws, however, is made difficult by the benefits of current policy to the prison industry and the federal, state and local bureaucracies set up to wage the drug war, according to Boston University economist Jeffrey Miron, who has written a book on the subject, *Drug War Crimes: The Consequences of Prohibition* (Independent Institute). Miron addressed a packed chambers in City Hall Oct. 14 along with former New Jersey State Police Detective Jack Cole, who spent 12 years working undercover on narcotics cases. Cole agreed with audience members who maintained that current drug laws target people of color out of proportion to the drug-using population. The hearings continue Thursday, Oct. 28, 5 to 7 p.m., in the chambers, second floor of Syracuse City Hall.

On tap to help pursue the exploration of alternatives will be Roger Goodman, who directs Seattle's Drug Policy Project; Canadian Sen. Pierre Claude Nolin, a member of the Conservative Party who chaired a committee to overhaul that country's drug policies; and Eugene Oscapella, director of the Canadian Foundation for Drug Policy. The hearings are free and open to the public. For information, call Eyle at 422-6231.

**--Walt Shepperd**