

The current spotlight on Mind Springs Health regarding the cost and quality of mental health services begs for a similar spotlight on the importance of preventing mental health and substance abuse problems. Once present, mental health disorders are expensive and difficult to treat. And, how can a community put a price on mental health or the devastating effects of suicide? You can't. At the same time, we do know the general cost of a DUI incident, ER visit, or hospitalization. And, it is possible to calculate the cost of substance abuse related absenteeism in the workplace.

Given the link between substance abuse and mental health, any city council or state considering recreational marijuana sales and licensing regulations should closely examine the latest available research on the topic. What is the cost and what is the benefit? Who pays for the cost? Who gets the benefit?

While current research indicates that marijuana is not as dangerous as alcohol in the adult population, it offers warning signs for any municipality considering heading down the cannabis "high" way.

We now know that the states that have legalized marijuana are now leading the nation in underage use of this drug. And, research shows a link between youth marijuana consumption and teenage suicide and schizophrenia. What is the human cost of a suicide or new case of schizophrenia? Is the revenue generated by marijuana sales worth it? Plus, additional cost calculations for marijuana include increases in DUI incidents, ER visits, and hospitalizations.

As our Grand Junction City Council considers recreational marijuana licenses, a wise path forward includes a thorough understanding of all the costs associated with increased access and use of cannabis products. There must be a transparent analysis of costs versus tax revenue benefits.

Are cities that follow the cannabis industry playbook really coming out ahead?

Invest In GJ LLC believes the answer is "no" unless we proceed with a more nuanced approach recommended by the American Public Health Association. Moreover, the proposal by Invest In GJ would honor the will of the voters as approved in Measure 2A. Our proposal does not alter the specific additional tax on marijuana sales to help fund a community center. And, Invest In GJ's plan for local marijuana sales benefits Grand Junction rather than the cannabis industry. Simply stated, our plan improves the cost-benefit analysis equation.

Invest In GJ LLC is a social enterprise - a new private entity with a business model that improves the health of our community, benefits the citizens, and reduces the health care costs for the businesses that already call Grand Junction their home. Think of Invest In GJ as business specifically designed to help our businesses reduce health care costs. You can visit the website at www.InvestInGJ.org.

Rather than sending millions of dollars in marijuana profits each year to the Front Range, we propose to use all of our profits from marijuana sales on proven determinants of health here in our community to

improve the health of local citizens. This is a proven method to create savings in health care for local businesses.

The cannabis industry, using a well-designed campaign to increase its footprint around Colorado and within other states, is becoming more powerful with each new municipality it enters. And, once voters invite the industry into their community, the regulatory and licensing process is easily rigged to favor the existing cannabis operators. Here in Colorado, most of them are located on the Front Range.

As potential applicants for a license, Invest In GJ has attended all the local city council meetings on this topic. We've witnessed the process. Even though Invest In GJ has pursued this discussion with our hard working city council, our voices have been drowned out by the increasingly powerful cannabis industry utilizing their Tobacco Institute like tactics. They use threats of litigation and industry friendly data to thwart any city council that looks to think "outside the box".

It is not too late for Grand Junction. But without a major shift in opinion at the city council, we may soon witness the beginning of a painful and permanent multi-year multi-million dollar cash transfer from Grand Junction to the Front Range. Cannabis owners will benefit while you pay the health care cost.

Or, we can do something different and innovative. The city council needs your encouragement to change course. They need your permission to pursue a different path, one that makes great financial sense for local businesses and our health. After all, the city council's goal here should be to prioritize Grand Junction's interests over those of the Front Range cannabis industry.

It's our choice. It's your city council. Don't let the cannabis industry tell us how to do business here in Western Colorado. Speak up and support local cannabis shop ownership and the proposal from Invest in GJ. Otherwise, we threatened to dig our mental health hole even deeper while simultaneously defunding our own community.

Dr. Michael Pramenko is a Past President of The Colorado Medical Society, Board Chair of Monument Health, and a Family Physician at Primary Care Partners.