

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2024 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE  
Third Reader

Senate Bill 469

(Senator McCray)

Finance

Economic Matters

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**Maryland Cannabis Administration – Cannabis Licensing – Protests of Renewal**

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This bill authorizes specified individuals to file a protest against a license renewal with the Maryland Cannabis Administration (MCA), as specified. If a protest against a license renewal is filed at least 30 days before the license expires, MCA may not approve the renewal without holding a hearing unless MCA finds that the basis of the protest filed against the renewal lacks substance. The bill establishes provisions governing what MCA may and may not consider when hearing and making a determination on a protest filed pursuant to the bill. MCA may adopt regulations to implement the bill.

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**Fiscal Summary**

**State Effect:** Special fund expenditures may increase minimally for MCA in FY 2028 through 2030, as discussed below; special fund revenues for MCA increase correspondingly. To the extent MCA expenditures increase, the amount of cannabis sales and use tax revenue distributed to the general fund and other special funds is affected correspondingly in accordance with current law, as discussed below. MCA can develop a process for protests of renewal and promulgate regulations within existing resources.

**Local Effect:** Potential minimal decrease in county revenues, as discussed below. Expenditures are not directly affected.

**Small Business Effect:** Potential meaningful.

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**Analysis**

**Bill Summary:** A protest against a license renewal may be filed with MCA, but it has to be filed by at least 10 individuals – all of whom have to be located within 1,000 feet of the licensed premises and be residents, commercial tenants who are not holders of or applicants for a license, or real estate owners.

A protest against a license renewal must also be signed under oath and based on the following:

- a violation of Title 36 of the Alcoholic Beverages and Cannabis Article;
- a violation of civil or criminal law;
- any other violation established by MCA by regulation; or
- conduct by a licensee that creates or maintains conditions that allow other individuals to act in a manner that disturbs the public peace, including (1) obstruction of public rights-of-way by unruly crowds; (2) assault, battery, or other disorderly conduct that disturbs the public peace; (3) vandalism; or (4) littering.

To hear and make a determination on a protest filed against a license renewal, MCA may only consider (1) issues arising out of specific complaints about the operation of the licensed premises and (2) the performance of the license holder for the four-year period immediately preceding the date of the renewal application. MCA may not consider zoning issues.

### **Current Law:**

#### *Cannabis Reform*

Chapters 254 and 255 of 2023 established the adult-use cannabis industry in the State following the enactment of Chapter 26 of 2022 and the passage of the associated constitutional amendment by (1) creating MCA as an independent unit of State government that is responsible for the regulation of medical and adult-use cannabis; (2) attributing cannabis-related duties to the Alcohol and Tobacco Commission and renaming it the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Cannabis Commission; (3) developing a licensing framework for the regulated sale of cannabis; (4) requiring all existing medical cannabis licensees to convert to adult-use cannabis businesses; (5) establishing a 9% sales and use tax on the sale of adult-use cannabis; and (6) creating the Office of Social Equity (OSE) in MCA and the Social Equity Partnership Grant Program in OSE. The sale of adult-use cannabis began on July 1, 2023.

#### *Cannabis Licensure and Renewal*

Under current regulations, a standard cannabis license is valid for five years on initial licensure and five years on renewal. At least 90 calendar days before the expiration of a license, MCA must notify the licensee of (1) the date on which the license expires; (2) the process and the fee required to renew the license; and (3) the consequences of a failure to renew the license.

At least 30 calendar days before a license expires, a licensee seeking renewal must submit:

- a renewal application, as specified;
- proof that fingerprints have been submitted to the Criminal Justice Information System and the Federal Bureau of Investigation for each agent and any owner with an ownership interest of at least 5%;
- to a full inspection of the licensed premises (unless a full inspection was satisfactorily completed within three months before the date of the license expiration); and
- payment of the required renewal fee.

MCA may renew a license that meets the requirements specified above.

If a licensee fails the inspection or submits a deficient application for renewal, the licensee may apply for reinstatement by (1) submitting a plan to correct the deficiencies noted during the inspection and (2) amending the renewal application.

MCA may deny a license renewal if:

- the plan to correct deficiencies identified in an inspection is deficient;
- the amended application for renewal is deficient; or
- the licensee is repeatedly found in violation of health and safety regulations during the license period.

A licensee who fails to apply for license renewal by the date specified by MCA, or whose license is not renewed by MCA, must cease operations at all premises and may not provide cannabis to any entity or individual.

A license may be reinstated upon submission of a reinstatement application approved by MCA and payment of the required reinstatement fee (\$2,000).

### *Violations and Hearing Authority*

After determining that a violation of Title 36 of the Alcoholic Beverages and Cannabis Article (Medical and Adult-Use Cannabis) or a regulation adopted under the title has occurred, MCA must suspend, fine, restrict, or revoke cannabis licenses and cannabis registrations, whether active, expired, or surrendered, or impose any authorized penalty. For any violation, MCA must give notice and hold a hearing in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act.

MCA may issue a subpoena for a witness or evidence in connection with any disciplinary action or any investigation or proceeding initiated for an alleged violation of Title 36. MCA is authorized to delegate its hearing authority to an employee within the administration and hold a hearing in absentia when the person against whom action is contemplated fails to appear after due notice.

Current regulations regarding hearing procedures apply to all hearings that MCA must conduct pursuant to statute or regulation (unless specific procedural regulations have otherwise been promulgated) and are intended to supplement the procedures required by law. A licensed business, registrant, agent, owner, or selected applicant that is subject to an MCA action has the right to a hearing. MCA must provide notice of any agency action and a statement of the right to a hearing. A party must file a request for a hearing within 30 days of the notice of an agency action. If a party does not request a hearing within that timeframe, the agency action becomes final and is not subject to appeal. However, if a party requests a timely hearing, MCA acquires jurisdiction over the matter and may delegate a contested case regarding MCA determination to the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH).

The standard of proof in a hearing must be by a preponderance of the evidence. In the hearing of a contested case involving allegations that the party violated a law or regulation, MCA has the burden of proof. In the hearing of a contested case resulting from the denial or proposed denial of a license, registration, or permit, the applicant has the burden of establishing that the applicant is entitled to the license, registration, or permit. The hearing officer must issue a written final determination summarizing (1) any adjustments to the determination of fines or penalties and the reason for MCA's action; (2) the deadline for payment of a fine or penalty; and (3) in the case of a license suspension or revocation, the reason for MCA's action. The final determination exhausts all administrative remedies. A party may appeal the final determination of MCA to a circuit court if it does so within 30 days of receipt of the final determination.

For additional information on the State's cannabis industry, see the **Appendix – Medical and Adult-use Cannabis Reform**.

### **State/Local Fiscal Effect:**

#### *Protest of Renewal – Hearings*

Because the bill requires MCA to hold a hearing on a protest against a license renewal before approving a renewal (unless MCA finds that the basis of the protest filed against the renewal lacks substance), MCA advises that a potentially high volume of hearings could occur in fiscal 2028 through 2030 based on the five-year renewal term for cannabis business licenses. Specifically, (1) there are 137 medical licensees that converted to

cannabis business licenses and are due for renewal beginning in fiscal 2028 and (2) MCA anticipates issuing up to 179 conditional cannabis business licenses during the first-round lottery in fiscal 2024, which are expected to become operational and obtain licensure beginning in fiscal 2025 and be due for renewal beginning in fiscal 2030. As a result, MCA advises that it likely needs one contractual administrative officer (beginning in January 2028 and terminating at the end of December 2030) to serve as a paralegal and handle the anticipated increase in workload during this time, at a cost of approximately \$44,100 in fiscal 2028 and \$78,700 in fiscal 2029.

While MCA does have hearing authority and advises that it plans to eventually conduct hearings internally, currently, MCA delegates hearings to OAH. Accordingly, the extent to which MCA alone might handle any increase in workload resulting from the bill is unclear. In addition, any increase in the number of hearings directly resulting from the bill – and the corresponding need for additional staff – cannot be reliably estimated at this time and can only be determined with actual experience under the bill. Nevertheless, to the extent that MCA ultimately needs to hire a contractual employee due to the bill, special fund expenditures from the Cannabis Regulation and Enforcement Fund (CREF) for MCA increase in fiscal 2028 through 2030. Special fund revenues to CREF for MCA increase correspondingly to cover any increase in costs, as current law requires that revenues from the sales and use tax on the sale of adult-use cannabis must first be distributed to CREF to defray the entire cost of the operations and administrative expenses of MCA. However, any such effect is anticipated to be minimal.

OAH advises that, while the bill may have an operational impact on the office, the office does not anticipate any material fiscal impact.

#### *Effect on License Renewal and Reinstatement Fee Revenue*

The bill is not anticipated to materially affect special fund revenues collected by MCA for license renewals and/or reinstatements.

#### *Effect on Distribution of Sales and Use Tax Revenues*

The bill is not anticipated to materially affect overall sales of adult-use cannabis – and, therefore, the total amount of sales and use tax revenue collected each year. However, the bill *may* affect the *distribution* of sales and use tax revenues for fiscal 2028 through 2030, as discussed below.

As noted above, current law requires that revenues from the sales and use tax on the sale of adult-use cannabis must first be distributed to CREF to defray MCA's operating and administrative costs. Remaining tax revenues are then distributed as follows: 50% to the State's general fund; 35% to the Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund administered

by the Comptroller's Office; 5% to the Cannabis Public Health Fund administered by the Maryland Department of Health; 5% to the Cannabis Business Assistance Fund administered by Commerce; and 5% to counties. Accordingly, any increase in costs for MCA results in a decrease in the amount of tax revenue remaining for distribution under these provisions.

Thus, to the extent that the bill increases MCA's administrative costs, the bill also results in a corresponding decrease in general fund revenues, special fund revenues for affected special funds, and county revenues. Any such effect, if it occurs, is anticipated to be minimal.

**Small Business Effect:** To the extent that a small business cannabis licensee has a protest of renewal filed against it, legal fees may be incurred for hearings, and the licensee faces possible denial of the license renewal that might not otherwise occur.

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### Additional Information

**Recent Prior Introductions:** Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

**Designated Cross File:** HB 1474 (Delegates Jackson and Allen) - Rules and Executive Nominations.

**Information Source(s):** Alcohol, Tobacco, and Cannabis Commission; Department of Commerce; Comptroller's Office; Maryland Cannabis Administration; Office of Administrative Hearings; Department of Legislative Services

**Fiscal Note History:** First Reader - February 20, 2024  
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## Appendix – Medical and Adult-use Cannabis Reform

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Chapters 254 and 255 of 2023 established the adult-use cannabis industry in the State by, among other things, (1) attributing cannabis-related duties to the Alcohol and Tobacco Commission and renaming it the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Cannabis Commission (ATCC); (2) establishing the Maryland Cannabis Administration (MCA) as an independent unit of State government that is responsible for the regulation of adult-use and medical cannabis; (3) creating a licensing framework for the regulated sale of cannabis; (4) requiring all existing medical cannabis licensees to either convert to adult-use cannabis businesses or cease operating by July 1, 2023; (5) establishing a 9% sales and use tax on the sale of adult-use cannabis; (6) creating the Office of Social Equity (OSE) in MCA and the Social Equity Partnership Grant Program within OSE; (7) establishing an advisory board on medical and adult-use cannabis; and (8) creating the Maryland Incubator Program. Additionally, ATCC and MCA must enter a memorandum of understanding providing that both parties agree to collaborate on enforcing provisions regarding unlicensed cannabis operations in the State. Multiple special funds (discussed below) were also established to hold specified revenues and cover specified expenses related to the cannabis industry.

### *Maryland Cannabis Administration*

MCA is an independent unit of State government established to administer and enforce the Medical and Adult-use Cannabis Title of the Alcoholic Beverages Article (including being the successor to the Natalie M. LaPrade Medical Cannabis Commission (MMCC) in matters concerning medical cannabis). MCA's responsibilities generally include promulgating cannabis industry regulations, licensing and registering cannabis businesses in the State, and enforcing the statutes and regulations related to the cannabis industry.

### *Adult-use Cannabis*

The sale of adult-use cannabis began on July 1, 2023. Pursuant to Chapter 26 of 2022 and the passage of the associated constitutional amendment, a person at least age 21 may use and possess the personal use amount of cannabis, while the possession of the personal use amount of cannabis by a person younger than age 21, as well as the possession of the civil use amount of cannabis, are subject to civil penalties. Possession of more than the civil use amount of cannabis by anyone is subject to a criminal penalty.

“Personal use amount” means (1) up to 1.5 ounces of usable cannabis; (2) up to 12 grams of concentrated cannabis; (3) cannabis products containing up to 750 milligrams of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC); or (4) up to two cannabis plants. “Civil use amount” means (1) more than 1.5 ounces but not more than 2.5 ounces of usable cannabis; (2) more

than 12 grams but not more than 20 grams of concentrated cannabis; or (3) cannabis products containing more than 750 milligrams but not more than 1,250 milligrams of delta-9-THC.

### *Medical Cannabis*

Pursuant to Chapters 254 and 255, MCA – rather than MMCC – is responsible for the State’s medical cannabis program, which is intended to make medical cannabis available to qualifying patients in a safe and effective manner. There is a framework to certify health care providers (including physicians, physician assistants, dentists, podiatrists, nurse practitioners, and nurse midwives), qualifying patients, and their caregivers to provide qualifying patients with medical cannabis legally under State law via written certification. Qualifying patients may possess (1) up to 120 grams of usable cannabis; (2) cannabis-infused products containing up to 36 grams of delta-9-THC; or (3) for a qualifying patient who is at least age 21, no more than four cannabis plants.

### *Cannabis Industry Regulations*

MCA proposed emergency regulations that took effect July 1, 2023; the emergency regulations are supplemental to the existing medical cannabis regulations. The emergency regulations (1) carry out the requirements for licensure of cannabis businesses, including implementing procedures related to applications, licenses, and registrations; (2) assist the Comptroller in the collection of taxes imposed on the sale of adult-use cannabis; (3) implement inventory management and tracking; (4) establish operating requirements for cannabis licensees or cannabis registrants; (5) establish limits on the maximum potency of cannabis products sold in the State; and (6) establish child protections, including child-resistant packaging and prohibitions on advertising to children.

Chapters 254 and 255 require that the July 1, 2023 emergency regulations be followed by nonemergency regulations adopted by MCA by July 1, 2024. These regulations must govern Internet sales of cannabis; implement and supplement packaging and labeling requirements for cannabis products; establish procedures for the use of point-of-sale technologies by dispensaries for all transactions that verify a consumer’s age using a driver’s license or other valid identification; and establish health, safety, security, and tracking requirements for the packaging and repackaging of cannabis by a dispensary. Additionally, MCA must adopt minimum standards for licensed growers to protect the rights of growers and employees.

### *Social Equity in the Cannabis Industry*

MCA must (1) conduct extensive outreach to small, minority, and women business owners and entrepreneurs who may have an interest in applying for a cannabis license before



accepting and processing cannabis license applications and (2) connect potential social equity applicants with OSE. MCA began to implement this requirement in 2023 by attending fairs and festivals, visiting Maryland colleges and universities, and conducting technical assistance seminars.

Chapters 254 and 255 established OSE as an independent office functioning within MCA, with the general purpose of promoting and encouraging full participation in the regulated cannabis industry by people from communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs in order to positively impact those communities. OSE has several responsibilities in furtherance of its purpose, including consulting with other agencies, providing recommendations to and working with MCA, assisting businesses to obtain financing through the Capital Access Program, and managing the Social Equity Partnership Grant Program (established to promote qualifying partnerships between operational licensees and social equity licensees).

### *Cannabis Licensing*

To operate a cannabis business in the State, a person must obtain a cannabis license from MCA. A license is valid for five years on initial licensure and five years upon renewal. MCA must issue licenses for growers, processors, dispensaries, incubator spaces, and on-site consumption. Additional licenses include micro licenses for growers, processors, and dispensaries. Licensing and renewal fees are established by MCA and range from \$5,000 for social equity applicants for certain licenses to \$50,000 for standard grower licenses. Existing medical licensees (growers, processors, and dispensaries) were required to pay a conversion fee based on the licensee's gross revenues for calendar 2022 to convert to medical and adult-use cannabis business licensees of the same type. Essentially all medical licensees (18 grower, 23 processor, and 96 dispensary licensees) entered payment installment agreements to convert into cannabis business licensees.

*First Round Social Equity Licenses:* Social equity applicants are those with at least 65% ownership and control held by one or more individuals who meet certain criteria, such as living in or attending a public school in a disproportionately impacted area (*i.e.*, determined to have had above 150% of the State's 10-year average for cannabis possession charges). As announced by MCA, the available standard licenses for social equity applicants in round one total 16 grower licenses, 32 processor licenses, and 75 dispensary licenses. The available micro licenses for such applicants total 24 grower licenses, 24 processor licenses, and 8 dispensary licenses. MCA accepted 1,708 on-time applications for first round social equity licenses from November 13 through December 12, 2023.

While first round licenses were expected to be awarded through a public lottery prior to January 1, 2024, MCA was forced to delay the lottery. Before the lottery can take place, MCA must review each of the 1,708 applications (1,400 of which were received within

72 hours of the application deadline) to ensure that it meets the minimum requirements for licensure before being entered into the lottery. If selected during the lottery, an additional review of the application materials will commence before a conditional license is awarded. During the conditional period (18 to 24 months), a licensee must complete a supplemental license application to undergo a criminal and financial history background check and take additional actions, including demonstrating legal control and local zoning and planning approval of the proposed site for the cannabis business. An unconditional license is issued to applicants who satisfy the supplemental application requirements and pay a license fee.

*Additional Grower License Awards for Specified Class Members:* Chapters 254 and 255 also required MCA to establish a process for issuing up to five additional grower licenses to recognized class members of *Pigford v. Glickman*, 185 F.R.D. 82 (D.D.C. 1999) or *In re Black Farmers Litig.*, 856 F. Supp. 2d 1 (D.D.C. 2011) that also meet other specified criteria. As of January 1, 2024, MCA reports awarding four conditional grower licenses to qualifying class members in the State.

*Second Round Licenses:* Beginning May 1, 2024, MCA must begin issuing a second round of licenses. The licenses may be limited to social equity applicants or opened to applicants from the general public, dependent on the outcome of a disparity study.

*Subsequent Licenses:* MCA may issue additional cannabis licenses up to the maximum limit authorized per statute based on the results of a market demand study. Future applications for licenses may be limited to social equity applicants and employ remedial measures based on the results of the disparity study.

#### *Advisory Board on Medical and Adult-use Cannabis*

Chapters 254 and 255 also established the Advisory Board on Medical and Adult-use Cannabis. The advisory board must (1) consider all matters submitted to it by ATCC, the Governor, MCA, or the General Assembly; (2) on its own initiative, provide recommendations to ATCC and MCA regarding guidelines, rules, and regulations that the advisory board considers important or necessary for review and consideration; and (3) establish at least two subcommittees to focus on medical and adult-use cannabis. As of January 1, 2024, the advisory board has not yet convened.

#### *Cannabis Sales and Tax Revenues*

The fiscal and policy note for Chapters 254 and 255 estimated adult-use sales revenues of \$400.0 million in the first fiscal year, and MCA estimated sales of \$600.0 million in the first fiscal year. However, adult-use cannabis sales from July through December 2023 totaled \$331.8 million. With six months remaining to be counted during the first fiscal year of adult-use cannabis sales, revenues will likely exceed the fiscal and policy note estimate

and possibly MCA's estimate. At the established tax rate of 9%, approximately \$29.9 million in tax revenues have already been generated during the first six months of adult-use cannabis sales.

### *Local Authority to Regulate Cannabis*

A "political subdivision" – defined as a county or municipality – may (1) establish reasonable zoning requirements for cannabis businesses that do not "unduly burden" licensees; (2) decide how to distribute its allocation of tax revenues; and (3) adopt an ordinance to *reduce* the statutory requirements for how far a dispensary may be located from specified locations (*e.g.*, schools, child care centers, playgrounds, libraries, etc.).

A political subdivision may not (1) prohibit transportation through or deliveries within the political subdivision of cannabis; (2) prevent the conversion of an existing medical cannabis licensee to a cannabis business license; (3) impose fees or requirements on cannabis businesses that are disproportionately greater than or more burdensome than other businesses; and (4) impose a tax on cannabis.

Additionally, an on-site consumption establishment may not operate in a location unless the political subdivision affirmatively authorizes the operation by issuing a permit or license. The political subdivision may also place restrictions on or prohibit the operation of on-site consumption establishments.

### *Public Health Actions Related to Adult-use Cannabis*

Chapter 26 (and the subsequent passage of the associated constitutional amendment) established the Cannabis Public Health Advisory Council to study and report its findings and recommendations by December 1 each year on specified public health impacts of cannabis legalization. The council convened its first meeting in August 2023, forming data collection and youth mitigation workgroups. The Cannabis Public Health Fund was also established to (1) support the advisory council; (2) support data collection and research on the effects of cannabis legalization in the State; (3) provide funding for education and public awareness campaigns related to cannabis use, including funding for educational programs to be used in schools; (4) support substance use disorder counseling and treatment for individuals; (5) provide training and equipment for law enforcement to recognize impairments due to cannabis; and (6) purchase technology proven to be effective at measuring cannabis levels in drivers. The Maryland Department of Health must administer the fund, which consists of revenues distributed to the fund based on tax revenues from the sale of adult-use cannabis (5% of those revenues), money appropriated in the State budget to the fund, and any other money from any other source accepted for the benefit of the fund. The fiscal 2023 budget included \$5.0 million for initial capitalization of the fund.

### *Cannabis-related Special Funds*

*Cannabis Regulation and Enforcement Funds:* Chapters 254 and 255 established the Cannabis Regulation and Enforcement Fund, administered by the Comptroller at the direction of MCA, to cover the costs of (1) operating MCA and (2) administering and enforcing the Medical and Adult-use Cannabis Title of the Alcoholic Beverages Article. The fund generally consists of fees the administration may impose (including application and registration fees) and tax revenues from the sale of adult-use cannabis sufficient to defray the entire cost of operating the administration. In addition, the balance of the Natalie M. LaPrade Medical Cannabis Fund, approximately \$12.3 million, was credited to the fund to cover the costs of implementing the Acts and regulating the cannabis industry in Maryland.

*Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund:* Chapter 26 also established the Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund, to be administered by the Comptroller, with the stated purpose of providing funds to community-based organizations that serve communities determined by OSE (in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General) to have been the most impacted by disproportionate enforcement of the cannabis prohibition before July 1, 2022. The fund consists of conversion fees paid by medical licensees totaling approximately \$60.9 million. The fund also receives 35% of the tax revenues from the sale of adult-use cannabis, distributed on a quarterly basis.

*Cannabis Business Assistance Fund:* Chapter 26 (and the subsequent passage of the associated constitutional amendment) established the Cannabis Business Assistance Fund to assist small, minority-owned, and women-owned businesses entering the adult-use cannabis industry. The Department of Commerce (in consultation with OSE) must administer the fund and must prioritize awarding grants and loans to (1) populations that have been historically disproportionately impacted by the enforcement of cannabis laws and (2) individuals who have been convicted of cannabis offenses. Commerce may not award grants or loans to small, minority, and women business owners and entrepreneurs with a personal net worth exceeding \$1.7 million. The fiscal 2023 budget included \$40.0 million for initial capitalization of the fund, and the fiscal 2024 budget includes \$40.0 million for the fund. The fund also receives 5% of the tax revenues from the sale of adult-use cannabis, distributed on a quarterly basis.