

# NEWS RELEASE / COMMUNIQUÉ

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 17, 2018

## OPSEU's Thomas calls for public cannabis option

TORONTO – OPSEU President Warren (Smokey) Thomas appeared on a *Financial Post* panel discussion and called for publicly run cannabis outlets in municipalities that don't want sales in private hands. He said the government is putting many municipalities on the spot by giving them just one chance to opt out of allowing private, for-profit stores to sell cannabis.

"As the smoke clears on Doug Ford's flip-flop on cannabis sales," Thomas said, "we see a number of municipalities standing up and saying, 'We don't want the social, regulatory and policing costs of private stores dumped on us. But we don't want organized crime coming in to fill the void, either.'"

"Of course, there'd be no problem if cannabis sales were kept in the experienced, responsible hands of LCBO staff. That's what health experts, law enforcement agencies and many others, including municipal leaders, told the previous Liberal government was best during its extensive consultations.

"But it doesn't have to be either/or," Thomas continued. "We propose allowing Ontario Cannabis Stores to set up shop in municipalities that don't want private stores. That doesn't necessarily mean more bricks and mortar. The existing LCBO network can be retrofitted to allow for cannabis sales."

The President was questioned about the motives behind OPSEU's support for publicly run cannabis distribution, suggesting the union was only looking out for its own interests.

"We represent over 155,000 workers," Thomas replied. "A few hundred workers won't make or break OPSEU. But as a social justice union, we call for public policy that is in the best interests of all Ontarians. And putting cannabis sales in private, for-profit hands is bad policy, pure and simple.

"As far as I can see, the only people who will benefit are the owners of the private stores – mostly former political staffers who stand to make eye-popping profits. That's money that could have gone into health, education and infrastructure instead of profiteers' deep pockets.

"And if you want to talk about motives, let's look at medical cannabis growers. They talked a good game about how they were filling a vital medical niche. We agreed. But now some are indicating a shift to recreational cannabis. Why? Better profits. I ask again, how can we trust private cannabis retailers to be responsible when their one and only goal is profit? And what happens to patients in need when there's not enough medical cannabis?"

Thomas also dismissed the option of online sales. "We've seen it in other jurisdictions: people don't want a record of buying cannabis. They want to pay cash. If there's a credit card record, there's a way to hack into it. That could mean not crossing the border or not getting hired. Do consumers really trust that information with private retailers either? Honestly, the more I look at the Premier's cannabis policy, the more I think he belongs on the Bong Show."

- 30 -

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August 17, 2018

Ms. Lynn Dollin  
President  
Association of Municipalities of Ontario  
801 – 200 University Avenue  
Toronto, Ontario M5H 3C6

Dear Ms. Dollin:

I am writing to you in light of recent statements by Premier Doug Ford regarding the sale of cannabis and in anticipation of the plenary session on August 22 on cannabis implementation at your upcoming annual conference in Ottawa.

Many Ontario municipalities have expressed real concern about the impact on them of the Premier's announcement on cannabis sales. As you know, Mr. Ford had previously leaned towards maintaining the Ontario Cannabis Store model. Now he has decreed that cannabis distribution will be private – before consultations even begin.

The panel of provincial and municipal officials that you will hear at your conference will speak to a number of very important implications of the new retail model. I am confident they will raise red flags that should make AMO completely rethink its support of private cannabis sales.

I am in close touch with public health experts. They agree that Mr. Ford's plan is bad policy from every point of view. A report commissioned by the previous government indicated most expert organizations, like MADD, "favoured a government-control board model, given its ability to promote public safety, control products and prices, and leverage existing best practices and lessons learned from similar models."

The Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police has reported on a York Regional Police study showing the "legalization of cannabis in other jurisdictions has resulted in increased rates of impaired driving, motor vehicle collisions, overall crime, as well as injuries/illnesses associated with cannabis use." One can only imagine the increased costs to municipalities – costs that will be significantly increased if a safe, responsible and public retail model is abandoned.

The Premier has given municipalities the option of not allowing private cannabis sales in their communities. But the offer is a one-time deal. Should private cannabis sales prove overwhelming in terms of health, policing and social costs, there will be no way out for municipalities: the province will impose its iron will on municipalities, leaving them to cope with the cannabis fallout.

Cannabis will soon be legal in Canada. Unfortunately, neither the federal nor the provincial government has given municipalities, law-enforcement agencies and government regulatory bodies enough time to prepare. So many unanswered questions remain.

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We need to turn to the municipalities: tough, enlightened and principled community leaders who will stand up and speak clearly to the need to make the best of a situation fraught with unknowns and hidden costs. We need a strong, united voice for public sale of cannabis through the Ontario Cannabis Store, a subsidiary of the LCBO.

Full disclosure: the previously accepted model ensures that workers would be OPSEU members. But let me assure you my union will not rise or fall on the addition of a couple of hundred members. This is a matter of public safety and public policy. With so many unknowns, a steady-as-we-go approach has already been endorsed by the experts in harm reduction and law enforcement. We hope you agree with them.

Ms. Dollin, during your annual conference, I trust that you and your members will take very seriously OPSEU's many concerns about a privatized model of cannabis distribution. It is bad, drive-by public policy that will have untold negative consequences for the province and its municipalities. United as one voice, we must stand up to the Premier and say no to private cannabis sales in our communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Warren Thomas', with a stylized, cursive script.

Warren (Smokey) Thomas  
President, Ontario Public Service Employees Union

c:       Monika Turner, Director of Policy, AMO  
          All Ontario mayors