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Oakland council OKs plan to set up marijuana factories

The 5-2 vote came after two hours of testy debate between growers who argued the proposal could destroy their livelihoods and businessmen who said it could turn Oakland into the Silicon Valley of pot.

By John Hoeffel, Los Angeles Times

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Oakland's City Council on Tuesday approved an ordinance that could make it the first city in the state to permit industrial marijuana production, a path-breaking decision that could spur the commercialization of a crop largely grown in hidden gardens.

The plan would authorize four potentially enormous pot factories, but makes no provision for the hundreds of growers who now supply Oakland's four dispensaries, which sold \$28 million in marijuana last year. The council, however, promised it would develop a plan for these growers before permits are awarded next year for the four large-scale marijuana operations.

"This is a monumental step forward," said Dale Gieringer, an Oakland resident and the longtime head of California NORML, which backs the legalization of marijuana. "It really means moving into the era of industrial-scale operations and Oakland means to do it big."

The 5-2 vote came after two hours of testy debate between pot growers who argued the proposal could destroy their livelihoods and businessmen who said it could turn Oakland into the Silicon Valley of pot, create jobs and generate new tax revenues. The audience booed, hissed and talked back, causing City Council President Jane Brunner to repeatedly admonish the crowd.

Steve DeAngelo, who runs Harborside Health Center, the city's largest dispensary, led a campaign to urge the council to accommodate these growers in the ordinance.

"These growers are not anonymous miscreants burning down houses and bringing crime to neighborhoods," said DeAngelo, who buys marijuana from more than 400 growers. "They are real people, decent people with families to support."

Jeff Wilcox, a businessman who has presented the most detailed plan for a marijuana factory, warned the council that if it did not act quickly, it would lose the momentum to other cities, such as Berkeley, which plans to ask voters to approve six large-scale commercial operations.

"You've got an issue here," he said. "You're late."

The proposal has ignited a contentious debate in Oakland over whether the city should be in the