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Testimony for Bill H.321

Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs
Senator Alison Clarkson, Chair
Vermont General Assembly
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

Good morning, Committee. Thank you, Chair, Vice Chair, and Committee Members, for allowing me time to testify before your Committee today on Bill H.321, an act relating to miscellaneous cannabis amendments.

My name is Airon Shaw, and I am both a small cannabis retailer, owner of Ninny Goat and Co., in Fairlee and a social equity applicant, and member of the Vermont Growers Association Retailer Working Group, a committee of local retailer industry leaders. A little bit about the town of Fairlee, it's mainly a summer and fall town which caused certain struggles. It will mark one year August 8 of being in the industry. I'm here today to express my support for H.321 if amended with the sensible and essential priority proposals put forth by the Vermont Growers Association and Vermont Cannabis Equity Coalition, and to share the lived realities and challenges facing small cannabis businesses in Vermont.

The adult-use market in Vermont holds great promise, but it also presents real challenges for small retailers and producers, especially those of us who entered the market with limited capital. As a small, undercapitalized retailer, it has been difficult at times to stay ahead of the game in a system that increasingly favors large, well-funded operations. What has made it possible for me to continue is the support and collaboration with Vermont's Tier 1 and Tier 2 growers and small-scale manufacturers.

The majority of the products I sell come from small cultivators. My mission from the beginning has been to prioritize small farmers—to create shelf space for those who often get overlooked. One example: I worked with a small grower who was experiencing cash flow issues and chose not to mark up his product, so he could move it off the shelf quickly and stay in business. These growers and manufacturers are the heart of Vermont's cannabis economy.

Vermont is known for standing with small farmers, but in the cannabis space, we've lost sight of that principle. Small cannabis farmers need our support too.

That's why I fully support the event permit language put forward by the Coalition and supported by the Lieutenant Governor and others that allows direct sales for small growers, manufacturers, and propagators. The current structure makes it nearly impossible for them to showcase their craft, especially when retailers often prioritize bigger, more recognizable brands. Allowing small producers to sell directly to the public—including seeds and living plants—would give them the opportunity to tell their stories, build direct relationships with customers, and stabilize their businesses. I respectfully ask the committee to support amending the law to allow all cultivators, to sell seeds and live plants to the public and retailers.

As a retail owner, I want to support small farmers as much as possible, but there are barriers that limit how much I can do. Direct sales would give them more autonomy and flexibility, while also benefiting the consumer with more access and diversity of products.

As a social equity applicant, I also want to emphasize the importance of the Cannabis Business Development Fund. Each year, I count on the social equity grant to help keep my business viable. If the fund is defunded, it will create an even bigger barrier for BIPOC and marginalized individuals looking to enter this market. This fund is more than financial support—it's a commitment to leveling the playing field and honoring the equity promises made at the beginning of legalization.

Finally, I want to speak in support of public consumption spaces. I live in a rental property where my lease prohibits smoking or consuming cannabis on the premises. I know many others in the same situation. For patients and consumers alike, we've made it unnecessarily hard to safely and legally consume their medicine or products. Legal cannabis is here—but we've left people without anywhere to legally use it. I urge the committee to support language in the bill that allows municipalities to create licensed public consumption spaces.

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I'm asking you today not just to consider a bill, but to think about the small businesses, patients, growers, and everyday Vermonters who are currently being left out of H.321 that can begin to address the structural challenges in our market—by supporting direct sales, maintaining equity funding, and allowing public consumption spaces.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and please consider the Vermont Growers Association and the Vermont Cannabis Equity Coalition as leading resources for all matters related to cannabis for Bill H.321, and any other cannabis-related issues.

Airon Shaw
Founder & CEO

