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The California mess

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

I was driving by one of my favorite newspaper/magazine stores a couple of days ago. New owners had just taken over, and they no longer sell periodicals. They sell pot.

And this is not the first -- it joins another marijuana store already in progress, about a mile down the road. Now, I don't live in what you would call a cutting edge neighborhood in Los Angeles -- it is a pretty typical suburb with nice homes and decent schools. So how is this possible? Because California has become a place where nothing happens the way it is supposed to anymore -- and the story of the weed sellers in my suburb is a lovely cautionary tale.

As you may know, California has allowed the sale of marijuana for "medical" purposes for a few years now. And as you might have guessed, not everyone who manages to get a "prescription" really has an illness that only a smoke can cure. Understanding this aspect of human nature, people in neighborhoods like mine sought to adjust laws to cap the number (and locations) of stores dispensing the stuff.

Four years ago, when the Los Angeles City council began working on this cap idea, there were just four dispensaries in town. Now there are as many as 600 -- and no one really knows the exact number.

All this rapid growth happened after the city council passed a moratorium in 2007 that was supposed to stop new stores from opening. That's right, after the moratorium was passed. The law was written with a massive loophole that no one noticed -- anyone could apply for a "hardship exemption" and open a store. And the city attorney's office couldn't afford to staff up and keep watch on who was applying.

So far, according to the Los Angeles Times, 506 dispensaries have applied for the exemptions.

The council last week passed new regulations to fix what it broke but they will most likely have

grandfather the current crop in -- so Los Angeles is stuck with the 600 stores, and my neighborhood will keep hosting its lovely two.

All because someone on the city council didn't quite know how to write a law properly.

It is a malady striking much of California -- in 1990, angry voters passed term limits for most state offices; local offices were term-limited a few years later. So everyone is pretty new at the job -- including our actor/governor. Learning-by-doing is admirable in many careers, but the state of California and its enormous economy seem to deserve something more.

The state is staring at a \$21 billion budget gap that grows worse each day -- and no one in government here has a good idea for tackling that. Draconian cuts to the poor and infirm are floated daily in the newspapers, along with hikes and fees for everything from state parks to local libraries. Sometimes, it feels like voters here have given up on their lawmakers finding any answer to anything.

Can't blame them, when the guys can't even get a pot "moratorium" right.

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Oh, and I really miss the magazine shop.

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