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Officials agree to hearings on medical marijuana

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Iowa pharmacy regulators will hold a series of public hearings, starting next month, about whether the state should legalize the use of marijuana for medical purposes.

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy, which previously has expressed doubts about the idea, voted unanimously Tuesday to hold hearings on the issue. After the hearings, it will decide whether to make a recommendation to the Legislature next spring.

The board decided to hold the hearings shortly after it voted to turn down a request that it reclassify marijuana as being legal for medical uses. That vote came in a longstanding case that led to a judge ordering the board to consider the matter.

Board Chairman Vernon Benjamin, a pharmacist from Argyle, said the board had fulfilled its obligations in the original case, but he said it felt the need to seek public opinions on the matter. "I think probably, there's a lot of people that have pertinent issues that they'd like to bring up and talk about," he said in an interview after the vote.

Benjamin said the case, pushed by marijuana proponent Carl Olsen, helped spark the decision to hold hearings. Board members said they hoped to hear from members of the public and from academic experts on the issue.

Olsen said afterward that he's optimistic Iowa will join 13 other states in making medical marijuana legal. "It's winning over and over again," he said. "I don't know why it wouldn't win here."
