



unmarked van in a strip-mall parking lot holding a briefcase full of baggies.

A higher rate, they contend, will fail to eradicate the black market and, in the absence of any penalty for possession, could actually be counterproductive and encourage growth of the underground commerce, depriving the state of anticipated tax benefits.

Dealing with the issue of appropriating the tax revenue, whatever the eventual rate, could prove to be even more contentious.

Earlier this month, for instance, three urban mayors — Ras Baraka of Newark, Steve Fulop of Jersey City and Ravi Bhalla of Hoboken — signed onto a manifesto demanding that communities such as theirs be given preference in the appropriations process as well as in deciding who is eligible for licensing.

They make the case that urban New Jersey has for years suffered more than any others in the war on drugs, including the prohibition on marijuana possession, and should, therefore, be favored in the distribution of profits from legalization.

Their view was echoed more recently by an African-American pastor from Woodbury who criticized the proposals currently under debate as favoring the state budget and the white marijuana industry. He called for the tax revenue to be allocated as "reparations" for those who he argued have been treated unjustly by law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

Whatever legislation eventually reaches the governor's desk, it is not likely to take on the appropriations issue directly but punt it to an advisory panel with responsibility for developing a regulatory system along with the conditions and qualifications for licensing.

It is anticipated that the panel will require at least a year to complete its work and, as it embarks on a series of public hearings, will be subject to intense political pressures and competing cross currents before the first joint is sold over the counter.

Murphy as well as Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex) all remain committed to legalization and the idea, in general, stifevRenemmse pmMc

