

LOCAL

Six more cannabis dispensaries licensed in Madera. Hopes are high for community benefits

BY ERIK GALICIA

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Downtown Madera could be home to six of the city's eight licensed cannabis dispensaries if full build-out goes as currently planned. Four of the dispensaries the Madera City Council licensed Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2023, are planned to open on Yosemite Avenue, also known as State Route 145. ERIK GALICIA EGALICIA@FRESNOBEE.COM

Good-paying jobs, community service and the revitalization of downtown are some of the fruits the Madera City Council hope an incoming cannabis industry will bear. A total of eight dispensaries are now on the horizon for the city of 60,000.

The city in August awarded two social equity permits — reserved for owners who have been harmed by cannabis criminalization — to Nebrina Madera at 123 N. D St. and California Cannoisseur at 100 S. E St. On Wednesday, the council awarded six more cannabis businesses licenses after an hours-long meeting, held public-interview style with close to 20 applicants and with no standing room left in the chambers.

The six businesses that were licensed Wednesday are:

- [Lavish Madera](#) at 520 N. Gateway Dr.
- [Mainstream Madera](#) 300 E. Yosemite Ave.
- [Embarc](#), which has a location in Fresno, at 530 E. Yosemite Ave.
- [Cannable](#), which has a location in Parlier, at 313 E. Yosemite Ave.

- [Stiizy](#), which has dozens of locations, but none yet in the valley, at 1105 Country Club Dr.
- [Culture Cannabis Club](#), which also plans to open in Fresno soon, at 233 E. Yosemite Ave.

Each [applicant](#) was scored on its business plan, how it would address safety issues and how it planned to give back to the community, among other criteria. Some of them are already known for how they give back elsewhere, such as Embarc in Fresno, where its community advisory board decides the allocations of the community benefit funds it provides. Others, such as Lavish and Mainstream Madera, have been handing out blankets, toys and turkeys in the city since the applications opened in spring 2022.

Aside from direct community service, councilmembers weighed the applicants' plans for their employees, such as living wages and unionization. Downtown investment, business attraction and budgetary support were also on the minds of the councilmembers.

Jose Rodriguez, District 2 councilmember, said his decision was guided by returning to the ideas he had when the city experienced a budget deficit in 2018.

"First and foremost, to bring revenue to the city, and cannabis retail sales creating economic growth and opportunities," he said. "Second, to help revitalize downtown and complement the ongoing [investment taking place on our State Route 145](#) (Yosemite Avenue)."

Four of the six dispensaries licensed Wednesday plan to open along Yosemite Avenue. The city has secured more than \$13 million in state and federal funding to improve that road. The two businesses that received social equity licenses will be located steps from the corridor.

“The old Citibank location, the former Chase Bank location and the former Habitat for Humanity location are constant reminders that much revitalization is needed downtown,” Rodriguez said. “These operators will help spruce up the buildings and begin operations sooner (rather) than later.”

Mayor Santos Garcia said he too saw the need for a cannabis ordinance in 2018, noting that “we needed to diversify our economy.”

A ban on cannabis remained in effect in Madera even after its legalization for recreational use at the state level in 2016. City residents voted overwhelmingly in 2020 to lift the ban and tax retail cannabis sales at 6%, other cannabis businesses at 4% and \$10 per square foot of cultivation space. The city estimates that cannabis will add more than \$1 million to its general fund each year.

Rodriguez said he envisioned Madera as a “hub for the cannabis industry,” making use of its access to Highway 99, an airport and land designated to expanding operations and grow facilities.



The location Mainstream Madera listed on its application for a retail cannabis permit is 300 E. Yosemite Ave., the location of the old Clothes & Things store at the intersection of Yosemite Avenue and C Street. ERIK GALICIA EGALICIA@FRESNOBEE.COM

District 5 Councilmember Elsa Mejia said she focused on the applicants' commitment to not just jobs, but well-paying ones.

"I know firsthand the slim possibilities for living wages that we face, which often drive us to work and inevitably spend in neighboring cities — all why we wish to see more in our own," Mejia said.

Rodriguez thinks those possibilities can come through the cannabis industry, which he said have the potential to lift the city's median income level.

"In doing so, it creates a multiplier effect," he said. "When folks have good paying jobs, it leads to discretionary income and it attracts bigger retail and more

choices for city residents.”

For Lavish Madera co-owner Akram Kassim being awarded a cannabis business license was a three-year effort.

“Our ultimate goal, even before this, was to help the community, to help out those that are in need, those that are less unfortunate,” he said. “This is not just a business opportunity for us.”

Business owners said they plan to network and work together “so we can expand as a community of cannabis,” said local tattoo artist and Mainstream Madera CEO Rico Saldivar. An “art hop” is in the plans.

He added that he thinks the city can continue to nurture the current “mom-and-pop” nature of downtown Madera while also taking advantage of the opportunity to catch attention from bigger retailers.

If the chosen businesses leave the industry for whatever reason, licenses could open up for other prospective cannabis dispensaries in the city, Mayor Garcia said.



In this file photo a bud tender displays a jar of cannabis at the High Times 420 SoCal Cannabis Cup in San Bernardino, Calif. Richard Vogel *AP*

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Erik is a graduate of the Missouri School of Journalism, where he helped launch an effort to better meet the news needs of Spanish-speaking immigrants. Before that, he served as editor-in-chief of his community college student newspaper, Riverside City College Viewpoints, where he covered the impacts of the Salton Sea's decline on its adjacent farm worker communities in the Southern California desert. Erik's work is supported through the California Local News Fellowship program.

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