

Chances appear bleak

Bill to ease penalties on pot greeted coolly

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After three years of being rebuffed in the Senate, proponents of a bill which would remove criminal penalties on possession of small amounts of marijuana have begun their annual routine this year in the House.

Their chances of getting anywhere look bleaker than ever, though. The bill has been referred to the House Judiciary Committee, one of the most conservative bodies in the legislature.

Judging from comments made by committee members

at a public hearing on the bill yesterday, there might not be a single ye-a vote in the entire 23-man group.

By now, the cast of characters at these marijuana hearings is familiar.

Sen. Clarence M. Mitchell III, D-Baltimore, prime sponsor of the measure, was back with his argument that possession of less than an ounce of marijuana is a victimless crime which wastes police time to enforce.

He put it a little stronger, this time, saying that marijuana laws in general were designed as "a tool of harrassment of

minority groups in this country"

At the time marijuana first became illegal, Mitchell said, the only people using it were blacks, Mexican-Americans and Orientals.

"The use has spread into the majority community," Mitchell continued, "but the application of the marijuana laws can still be used as the same kind of tool" to harass blacks and "kids in flower-colored Volkswagens."

According to Mitchell's bill, persons found with less than an ounce of marijuana would be subject only to a \$100 fine. They would receive a citation such as a traffic ticket and incur no criminal arrest record.

Lt. Frank Mazzone, head of the state police narcotics section, was back again to speak against the bill. This year he, too, took a tougher stand than last.

Mazzone told the committee that most people charged with possession of marijuana have negotiated with prosecutors to drop more serious charges and therefore they deserve more serious penalties.

Mazzone had told the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee that he would support the bill if it were amended to allow police to conduct searches in cases where any amount of marijuana is found.

Spokesmen for various groups promoting marijuana decriminalization pointed out that there is no solid evidence that marijuana is harmful.

Del. David L. Scull, D-Montgomery, said public opinion on marijuana is moving toward endorsement of use of the drug.