

ASUO begins battle over OSPIRG's student funds

By PAUL TELLES
Of the Emerald

A long battle may begin tonight when the Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group presents its goals to the Incidental Fee Committee.

Although OSPIRG's goals are likely to be approved, some student government members have expressed doubts about the group's effectiveness and value to University students.

Consequently, the group may have difficulty maintaining its current funding level when the committee begins dishing out funds winter term.

IFC Chairer Jon Neiderbach says students may not be receiving service worth the group's \$42,000 budget and that perhaps student government should not be funding a general lobbying organization like OSPIRG.

"It's very nice to spend money on things that help the state as a whole, but you shouldn't spend mandatory student fees," Neiderbach says, explaining that OSPIRG works on a variety of non-educational issues.

ASUO Pres. Dave Eaton says funding OSPIRG directly through the IFC may subject students to a conflict of interest.

For instance, Eaton says many University students disagreed with OSPIRG's opposition to field-burning, yet helped pay for the group's lobbying efforts.

To prevent students from financially supporting opinions they don't share, Eaton says he will suggest a "check-box" system when the groups apply for IFC funding in January.

Under that plan, students would check a box on their registration form to have any of their incidental fees spent on OSPIRG. The plan would have to be approved by the State Board of Higher Education, but Eaton says it shouldn't be difficult to obtain the board's consent because Oregon State University, which currently gives much less to OSPIRG than the University, would probably agree to the plan.

Eaton says local OSPIRG groups don't have sufficient control over locally generated funds and that the groups have recently proved ineffective.

Currently, OSPIRG funds are pooled by the group's state office and spent according to its decisions. Consequently, the money allocated by the IFC may not be spent in the University area.

The group wants to improve its effectiveness by spending more money, Eaton says, but he doesn't think that's a good way to revive a failing program.

The ASUO won't recommend continuing OSPIRG's \$1-per-term funding from each student, Eaton says. He voted against the proposal as an IFC member last year.

In the goal proposal submitted to the IFC, the group admits it recently has been plagued by internal divisions and poor control of expenditures. But Bob Jenks, OSPIRG's state chairer, says the group was very effective in the last legislative session.

Jenks points to revision of renters' rebate requirements, near-passage of a bill requiring insurance companies to consider only driving records when insuring new clients and protection of the Crabtree Valley wilderness as proof of OSPIRG's effectiveness.

Jenks said the lobbying group is not over-funded, but rather is just beginning to recover from a long period of declining revenue. State-wide funding has dropped from \$150,000 five years ago to its present \$100,000, he says.

Local OSPIRG chairer Linda Eisenberg says the group has a broader scope than the Oregon Student Lobby, an education lobby. "We are students working in the public interest," she says.

Both Eisenberg and Jenks say students who disagree with OSPIRG priorities are free to join the group and try to redirect its efforts.

"You're not funding an issue, you're funding an organization," Jenks says.

University students don't lose control of their money when it goes to the state-wide office because the University has three delegates on the board that determines expenditures, Jenks explains. Many OSPIRG services would be impossible without centralized funding, he adds.

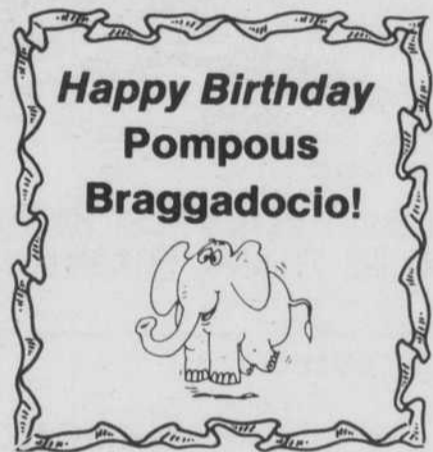
"Only by combining resources can we afford to hire a good attorney and researchers."

OSPIRG won't oppose the "check-box" funding system if it's suggested, Eisenberg says.

"It would be a good way for us to get feedback on how students feel about how we're doing."

Despite the potential funding problems, Eisenberg says OSPIRG is confident it will have a good year in the Legislature and will find broad-based student support for its efforts.

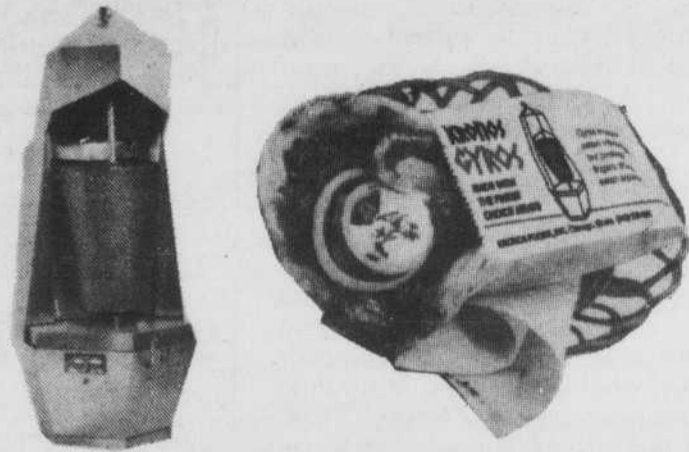
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