

In a crossfire

University drug center caught between groups

By Sean Meyers
Of the Emerald

Editor's Note: This is the second of a three-part series examining current marijuana laws and proposals for changes.

The University's Drug Information Center is a Beirut in the Oregon marijuana conflict — caught between warring factions but unwilling to choose sides.

That position has a few people upset in a war of words where information — whether proven or not — is the deadliest weapon.

The drug center began 11 years ago and has operated under grants from the University, county and state as well as contributions from private concerns and fees for presentations. But the Legislature, in a budget squeeze, pulled out financial support and the center's staffing has dropped from five full-time employees to two.

Despite the cutback, there's no shortage of critics to kick the Drug Information Center while it's down.

Center director Mark Miller says proponents of both sides of the marijuana issue — for and against legalized personal use — end up distorting the purpose of the center to represent their own views.

John Saja, a spokesman for the pro-marijuana Oregon Marijuana Initiative, says Miller is "teaching kids how (marijuana) can be used responsibly."

"That is absolutely false," says Miller. "At no time do we promote drugs, and at no time do we encourage drug use. Our job — all we're allowed to do — is to provide information."

"We draw criticism from the anti-marijuana people because they don't see us pounding the podium against drugs," says Miller. "And the pro-marijuana people don't want to admit that we show the potential harmful effects of the drug. They really want their own

values reiterated, and we're not here to do that."

Miller cited a survey that says 60 percent of school kids have smoked marijuana and 40 percent have not.

"If I walk into a school and appear anti-marijuana then that 60 percent is going to turn me off, no matter what I say," says Miller. "If I appear pro-marijuana, that 40 percent is going to turn me off, no matter what I say. . . this agency has to be a neutral information source to maintain its credibility."

"Marijuana is just about the most hotly politicized issue in Oregon," says Miller. "Even more so than abortion. People don't see it as a gray issue any more, they see it as either black or white."

But Oregon Free From Drug Abuse, which represents about 30 organizations throughout the state, is less than enamored with Miller's presentations.

"Mark Miller publicly maintains that he is neutral and that he just gives out information," says Nan Henderson, director of the organization. "Our position is that he is not neutral, that he presents the use of illegal drugs as not that bad and not that harmful."

Henderson says the presentations give the impression that marijuana is "safer than legal drugs using his consumer safety rules."

Henderson says Miller cites outdated sources that give a distorted picture of the medical effects of drugs. "Especially on marijuana and cocaine. We just haven't been happy with his presentations."

Miller says his presentations are threefold — the first task is to provide



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accurate information.

"I'm well aware of what parents want me to tell their kids. But when we exaggerate the issues, we lose credibility," says Miller.

Presentations also stress "decision-making techniques." Dosages of certain drugs are available to prevent permanent damage.

And the center promotes alternatives.

"When you ask a kid what it would take for them to stop using drugs, they say 'simple. Give me something better.'"

Contrary to Oregon Free From Drug Abuse's stance on Miller's presentations, Oregonians Cooperating to Reduce Drug Abuse, headquartered in Eugene, says Miller gives an accurate picture of the dangers of drug use.

"When you concentrate your efforts on feeding kids scare stories about how marijuana causes brain damage, and those reports haven't been proved conclusively," says Joe Wilson, spokesman for OCRDA, "then they start questioning the things they hear about PCP, heroin and other dangerous drugs."

"As far as I'm concerned, what Nan Henderson is doing is using prejudice against marijuana. When you do not allow the truth to be known, then what you're doing is promoting drug abuse."

Funding cuts halt park work

By Lisa Erb
Of the Emerald

The Lane County public works department says it needs private "park operators" who would maintain County owned parks in return for the rights to operate such enterprises as marina facilities and concession stands on park land.

The county laid off all of its field maintenance staff on Oct. 15 due to county budget cuts. Now there is no one to maintain its five major parks: Orchard Point, Richardson, Baker Bay, Lowell, and Camp Lane.

"The way things stand right at the moment is that Lane County's parks are closed," says Craig Starr, superintendent of the Public Services Division of the Department of Public Works.

"We suffered a 50 to 60 percent budget cut last year," Starr says. "And our funds lasted until the middle of October. Now we are searching for a way of still providing recreation opportunities for the county."

A major proposition under consideration now is to allow private businesses to operate on park land and to use some of their revenues to keep the park properly maintained.

A business contract has been drafted, and will be discussed and made final at a meeting today at 7:30 p.m. in the main meeting room of Harris Hall, 125 E. Eighth Avenue.

The Open Space Advisory Committee will solicit comments from public and private park operators, and request competitive bids from those interested in taking on park maintenance.

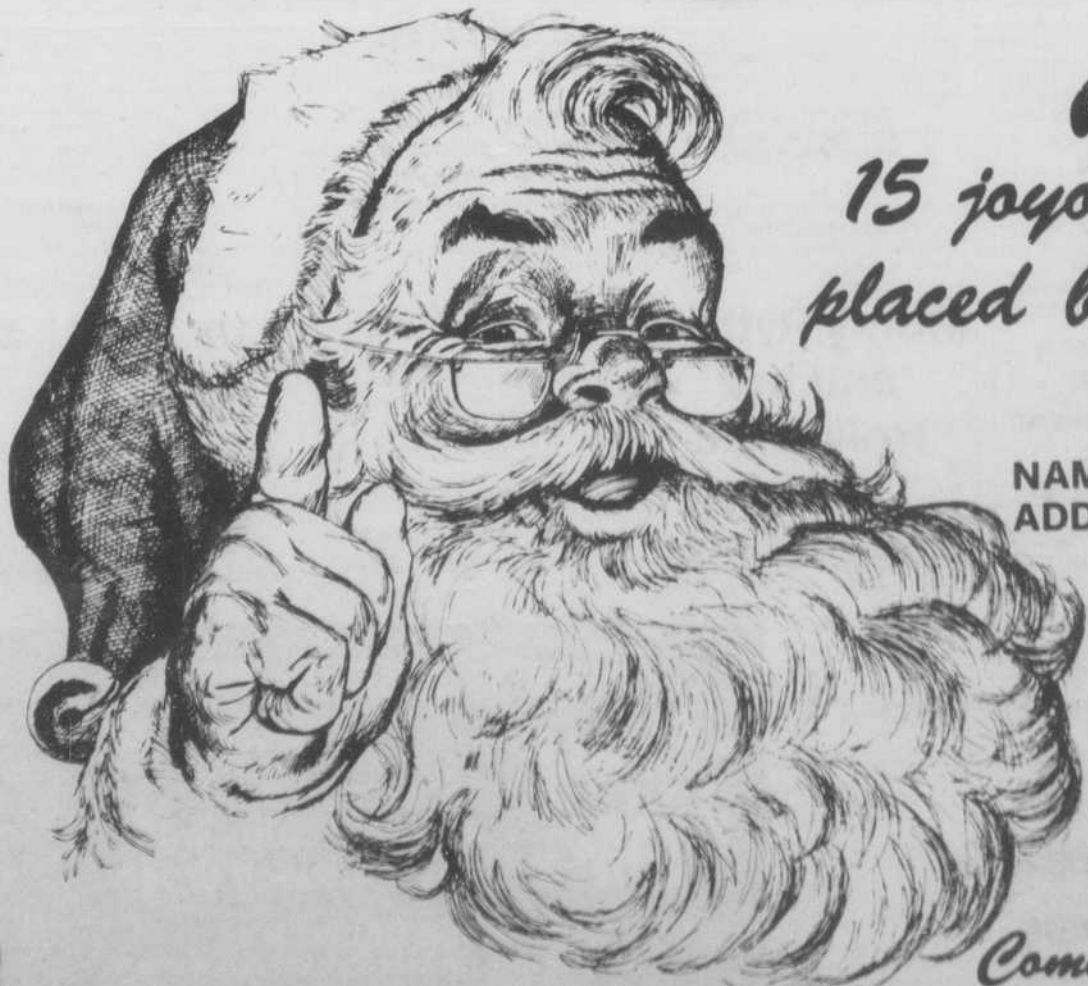
The general provisions of the proposed contract cite the business owner as the "park operator" responsible for landscape, facility maintenance, operation and management of mooring boats, camping, picnic reservations, entry fees, concessions and events.

According to Craig, the county will exercise a large amount of control over the general quality of the park and its facilities.

Craig expresses doubts about contracting with businesses as a solution. "It's pretty tough. We've got records of how much revenues parks bring in, and how much money the county has spent, and we couldn't cover our cost."

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