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Unexpected financing problems hit proposed student food store

By Stephen Maher
Of the Emerald

The door of the proposed food store in the EMU basement is covered with black plastic. A cigarette butt lies in the otherwise empty display case, and a look in the room reveals rows of stacked chairs, a couple of pianos and a dusty rug.

The future of The Common Market is in doubt.

"It's stymied by the fact that we were not able to fund it like the ASUO wanted it funded," said Virginia Boushey, assistant to the executive vice chancellor of the Oregon State System of Higher Education.

"We don't see a solution to the problem. And as far as I know, it's not going to happen," Boushey added.

In May, the Incidental Fee Committee approved a \$24,444 loan to The Common Market, a subsidiary of Student Projects Inc. But student incidental fees are considered state money as soon as they are collected. Boushey said. And state controllers won't allow transfer of state funds to a private corporation without billing or purchase orders in return.

"The money needs to be spent through the University record-keeping system," said Ross Hall, State System controller.

Although no statute forbids the direct transfer of state funds to a private corporation, none allows it either, Hall said.

"The attorney general's office has cited this application of law in some of their opinions," he said.

The problem with purchase orders and billings is that sellers don't like waiting weeks to be paid for their goods, Boushey said, adding that "the state is notoriously slow" in paying off bills.

The IFC loan was intended to cover The Common Market's first year of rent, pay for its merchandise and generally see the store through the first year of operation, said Steve Nelson, ASUO president and SPI board member.



Photo by Allan Lazo

The proposed food store's display case stands empty while the store's funding is in question.

Nelson said he believes the store eventually will open despite the recent problems.

"I fully expect it to open by the end of fall term," he said. "This is not the end of the project."

There are a number of alternatives to the original proposal that need to be researched, including one that would have the IFC buy subscriptions for students to the food store, Nelson said. The IFC currently buys subscriptions to the Oregon Daily Emerald for University students, Nelson noted. Students have the option of getting their subscription money back at the beginning of each term.

"It's the first option that comes to mind," he said.

Another alternative would be for SPI to set up a booth and collect optional fees from students, Boushey said.

But approving any of the possible alternatives will take some time, Nelson said.

"One of my difficulties is that there's not a full SPI board to deal with this (during the summer), and I can only spend so much time on it," he said. The corporation's board of directors will not convene until mid-September at the earliest, Nelson said.

When the loan was approved in May, both the ASUO Executive and the IFC thought the money could be transferred to SPI in one lump sum, he said.

But according to Hall, "there would have to be a bill presented to the Legislature" in order for that to ever occur.

"I really want to see it get off the ground and succeed, but at the same time I'm very cautious about it and want to make sure it's done right," Nelson said. The store would be a good way for dorm residents and other students to obtain inexpensive food, he added.

The EMU hasn't heard that the food store will not use the space, said Jan Hosmer, EMU assistant director and business manager. The basement room, which formerly housed Anderson's Sporting Goods, will be reserved for the food store until a decision is made on its future, she said. The room is currently being used as storage space in conjunction with the EMU Ballroom renovation project.

Both Nelson and Boushey denied that problems with a previous University food store, the Food-Op, which closed in 1983 after work-study abuse was discovered, has anything to do with the current transfer of funds.

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