

## Commissioning DPS officers means commissioning risks



Bryan Dixon Emerald

In the past week, Tom Fitzpatrick, director of the University's Department of Public Safety, has been meeting with campus groups and the media to announce that DPS will commission as many as 11 of its officers by April 1.

For those who haven't heard, commissioned officers would have the legal right to stop and frisk people suspected of illegal activity and to make probable-cause arrests. The editorial board met

with Fitzpatrick to discuss the implications of this decision, and we still believe commissioning officers is unnecessary and runs the risk of creating further friction between students and the officers charged with protecting them.

Giving police powers to individuals who are not police, on its face, seems a little scary. There are questions of safety and responsible conduct for everyone involved. Fitzpatrick did offer some rationale for the change, and perhaps it can be weighed against the risks to see if the change holds value.

Most upsetting to us, however, is the complete lack of input and consideration from the students. The last time we checked, students pay a good portion of the money that keeps this school, and DPS, operating. Students are the ones whose safety needs protecting. Why did no one ask what the students thought?

Granting our concerns, we would encourage the entire campus community to adopt a cautious wait-and-see policy. Extreme anger and strident protest are out of balance with the circumstances. But Fitzpatrick and other University administrators did not handle this decision in the best way.

Our first concern lies with the qualifications of DPS officers. These officers receive a shortened version of training which is similar to that given to the Oregon State Police and the Eugene Police Department, but it's not the same. Fitzpatrick said that officers will be eval-

uated at length before they are commissioned, and they will receive additional training from the district attorney's office and, before July 1, from EPD. That training still does not make a police officer. We're sure there are good personnel at DPS, but they shouldn't be granted police powers.

One of Fitzpatrick's rationales for the commissioning, according to his press release, is that it will better protect the officers, "who are oftentimes placed in jeopardy due to their inability to take enforcement action, pending the arrival of Eugene police and the potential escalation of the situation being dealt with."

In person, Fitzpatrick told us that instead of making a citizen's arrest, which is all officers are currently allowed, they will now be able to handcuff a suspect. Are we to believe that it is somehow safer for an unarmed officer to attempt to physically contact and handcuff a suspect? What if the suspect resists? Aren't unarmed DPS officers potentially at greater risk with these new powers?

Safety concerns make us think that in the not-too-distant future, arming DPS officers will be a consideration. Currently, this is prohibited by Oregon law. Fitzpatrick's press release says, "Research indicates that Oregon is the only state nationally that presently does not afford its public institutions of higher education the authority to grant full peace officer status."

That sounds like the beginning of a future argument for arming officers, especially if they are in situations where making an arrest compromises their safety.

Enhancing students' safety was certainly the main thrust of Fitzpatrick's discussion with the Emerald board, even though crime statistics show our campus is very safe, and violent crimes have fallen to nearly none in recent years.

DPS officers with these new powers will be able to follow up on thefts that EPD simply cannot pursue, giving students better protection. DPS officers can investigate a stolen backpack, build a case against a suspect, arrest that student and follow through to the district attorney's office and into the courtroom, according to Fitzpatrick.

But we don't believe the district attorney will be rushing to prosecute every incidence of thievery. Even if a case is built, we all know that a stolen bike gets moved out of the neighborhood and repainted very quickly. Few people are likely to see this increased service level.

Our biggest objection to this change is the lack of outside input. Fitzpatrick said this was an administrative decision, and "administrators are employed to administer."

He also emphasized that students can't vote on everything. They certainly cannot, but for a decision of this magnitude, with the recent history of University President Dave Frohnmayer's unilateral decision on the Fair Labor Association, wouldn't it have been both wise and polite to hold a well-publicized open forum where students could come and have their questions answered and have their concerns heard? The same decision

could then have been made, but the perception toward DPS and the sense of community on campus would have improved.

We would like to ask both Frohnmayer and Fitzpatrick to meet with the community in 170 Lawrence in an open forum and let the campus have an opportunity to speak. Listen to students' concerns and answer their questions. There are a few questions we still have about this decision, and perhaps these could be answered at such a forum.

First, how would the commissioning be funded? Will the officers be paid more, how much will the training cost, and where will this money come from?

Second, has commissioning worked well on other Oregon campuses? The other campuses are in different environments than ours. Were their crime rates higher or lower than our own, and what effect has commissioning had on those rates?

Lastly, will this change possibly save money; i.e., is it a more efficient use of campus and city resources?

Now that we've had our say, we think everyone should take a deep breath and think about these changes before reacting.

Fitzpatrick told us that the phrase "racial profiling" has already been mentioned to him in relation to the officers' right to stop and frisk. We think that's going a bit far. Perhaps we should accept that everyone is not inherently racist and classist. Fitzpatrick assured us that his officers will respond to the situation and not to the individual, and we have no reason to distrust him.

DPS is also setting up a Public Safety Advisory Group to review complaints or commendations of officers, and that board can be expected to deal with profiling issues, should any arise.

Overall, the commissioning seems unnecessary and definitely lacks student input. But perhaps DPS can use these powers responsibly; perhaps they can rise to the occasion and offer more effective services to the campus. Let's give them the chance.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.

### Letters to the editor

#### River deserves our sacrifices

The Willamette River cannot be resurrected without sacrifices by all of us. When Vice Provost for Research Richard Linton ("Frohnmayer advises of planned tuition hike," ODE, Jan. 11) said that "it was in the best interest of the University to leave all options open in regard to the research park," he raised a hammer that can drive one more nail into the river's coffin.

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