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Oregon Daily Emerald

An independent newspaper | www.dailyemerald.com | Since 1900 | Volume 106, Issue 137 | Tuesday, April 19, 2005

Senate bill grants aid for at-risk students

The legislators involved hope to target dropout rates and ease students' transitions to college

BY ADAM CHERRY
NEWS REPORTER

State Senate Republicans joined forces with Democrats in the Senate Education and Workforce Committee last week when the five-member bipartisan committee unanimously approved Senate Bill 300, which allows some high school students to enroll in post-secondary courses for credit at colleges and universities.

Legislators indicated that they hope to streamline the transition from high school to college and reduce dropout rates, especially for disadvantaged students, with the "Expanded Options Program."

Sen. Charles Starr, R-Hillsboro, Education and Workforce Committee vice chair, said the bill would act as a complement to what many districts are already doing and will provide accelerated opportunities for at-risk students.

"We all agree that those disadvantaged students really need all kinds of encouragement to get them involved in their own education and get them into higher ed when they're not likely to be able to pay for it," Starr said. "It's a hand-up instead of a hand-down, and that's good."

Sen. Avel Gordly, D-Portland, sponsored the bill.

"The value of this idea is that it gets more and more kids hooked on college," Gordly said in a press release. "Once they see that they can succeed at the college level, their confidence will improve and their interest in continuing their education will grow."

The bill will now be forwarded to the Joint Ways and Means Committee, which writes the state budget.

Starr described the Ways and Means Committee as a "graveyard for good ideas," but Gordly said she believes the program is in line with the legislature's priorities.

"The Ways and Means Committee's charge is

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IN BRIEF

Ben & Jerry's holds Free Cone Day

Eugene's Ben & Jerry's scoop shops at 1239 Alder St. and 485 Coburg Rd. will serve free ice cream today from 12 p.m. to 8 p.m.. Free Cone Day is part of an annual tradition, now in its 26th year, that Ben & Jerry's shops around the world share with their customers to thank them for their support.

The two Eugene Ben & Jerry's shops traditionally pick a charity to support on Free Cone Day. This year's charity is Relay For Life, which raises money for cancer research. Customers who choose to donate to Relay For Life will receive "buy one, get one free" coupons to be redeemed on a future Ben & Jerry's visit, in addition to their free ice cream cones.

Eugene franchise owner Gary Bertelsen said only 14 of the usual 36 flavors will be served on Free Cone Day in order to handle the massive crowd. He said last year close to 11,000 free cones were served at the Alder Street shop, which has served more ice cream during Free Cone Day than any other shop in the western United States for the past four years.

— Eva Sylwester

Finances plague housing

Past and present University officials weigh in on the future of residence halls, property acquisition, and the fairness of certain financial policies

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF
SENIOR NEWS REPORTER

The Living Learning Center, slated to open in fall 2006, is hailed by University officials as an innovative and long-overdue addition to the University campus, especially with the residence halls ranked No. 1 on the Princeton Review's 2004 list of "dorms like dungeons."

But officials are aware that the addition does nothing to improve the 50-year-old residence halls already in existence, and they say financial problems continue to hinder University Housing. Many questions exist among past and present University officials about the state of housing finances over the years and the fairness of the administration's policies toward the housing department.

PART ONE OF TWO

Today: Officials' financial and land repayment policies hinder residence halls.

Wednesday: Financial consultants offer opinions and a task group addresses the transition of property management.

Interviews regarding land repayment polices within the University and the housing department's financial obligations reveal differing opinions about how student housing money has been used to quell the ongoing financial problems that threaten Oregon universities.

Financial factors

Former University Housing Director Marge Ramey said the University seems to view student housing as a "stationary cash cow."

Ramey served as director from 1983-91 and said during that time the University used student housing money to fund land acquisitions that benefited the entire University as well as a variety of other projects unrelated to student housing.

University Housing is required to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in indirect overhead assessment charges that go into a general fund for the University, something to which auxiliary enterprises like parking also contribute.

Ramey said one major difference in University Housing now that she's retired is the presence of that indirect overhead assessment. Ramey said the University asked her to pay the assessment during her final years with housing but she "objected to that absolutely strenuously."

"I felt very strongly that to try to attack the students simply because they lived in the University housing was very unfair," Ramey said.

When the assessment was added in 1991, the first year University Housing Director Mike Eyster took over, Ramey said "the money had to go on to (students') increased board and room because there's no other income in (housing)," meaning fees in the residence halls had to increase if extra financial obligations were tacked on like the indirect overhead assessment.

University Vice President for Administration Dan Williams, who will retire July 1, said he bristles at the thought that housing has been somehow treated unfairly over the years and said the administration's policies toward housing are no different than every other university across the country, specifically with the indirect overhead assessment.

"We put into practice a policy that's very common at other institutions, and that is to recover your institutional overhead costs from your auxiliary enterprises," Williams said.

Since its inception in 1991, the indirect overhead assessment has cost housing more than $250,000 annually, and the payment amount has increased every year.

University Housing is also required to make payments toward residence hall debt for every university within the Oregon University System. The debt fund is known as the consolidated debt pool.

The cost of construction and renovation of residence halls goes into an OUS fund that each university pays into based on its average residence hall occupancy rate.

Thus, debt payment is based on student population rather than the actual amount of debt a particular institution generates, making it possible for smaller universities within OUS to build residence halls.

The debt pool was capped in 1997, but University Housing will continue making payments through 2027, meaning housing is still paying debt on residence halls that are more than 50 years old. For the debt pool to be capped, each university had to agree to pay OUS an additional $20 per occupant that goes into an emergency reserve fund.

Structural changes

Former University Housing Director H.P. Barnhart, namesake of the H.P. Barnhart residence hall complex, worked in housing from 1949-79 and said his duties didn't pose any problems to the residence halls' financial state at the time.

"I know I had a boss who told me 'hey, you have to please the students, you have to pay your expenses, and you have to be able to pay the bonds and if you do that, why, you'll have a job,'" Barnhart said. "So that was the way it was operated."

Barnhart said the consolidated debt pool was something he "squawked about" upon its inception, but because it served to provide residence halls for universities that couldn't afford to independently finance them, housing officials eventually accepted it.

Neither Ramey nor Barnhart said they encountered financial difficulty from the consolidated debt pool, something Eyster and Williams attributed to the pool's role as a revenue-generating device before renovation became a dire need for the University.

If the debt pool is used to build new residence halls rather than renovate them, the system is gaining more revenue, but University officials said if it's used for renovation it only increases the amount of debt while occupancy remains the same.

"During (Barnhart's) years the consolidated debt pool was used to add beds across the system, and when you're adding beds you're

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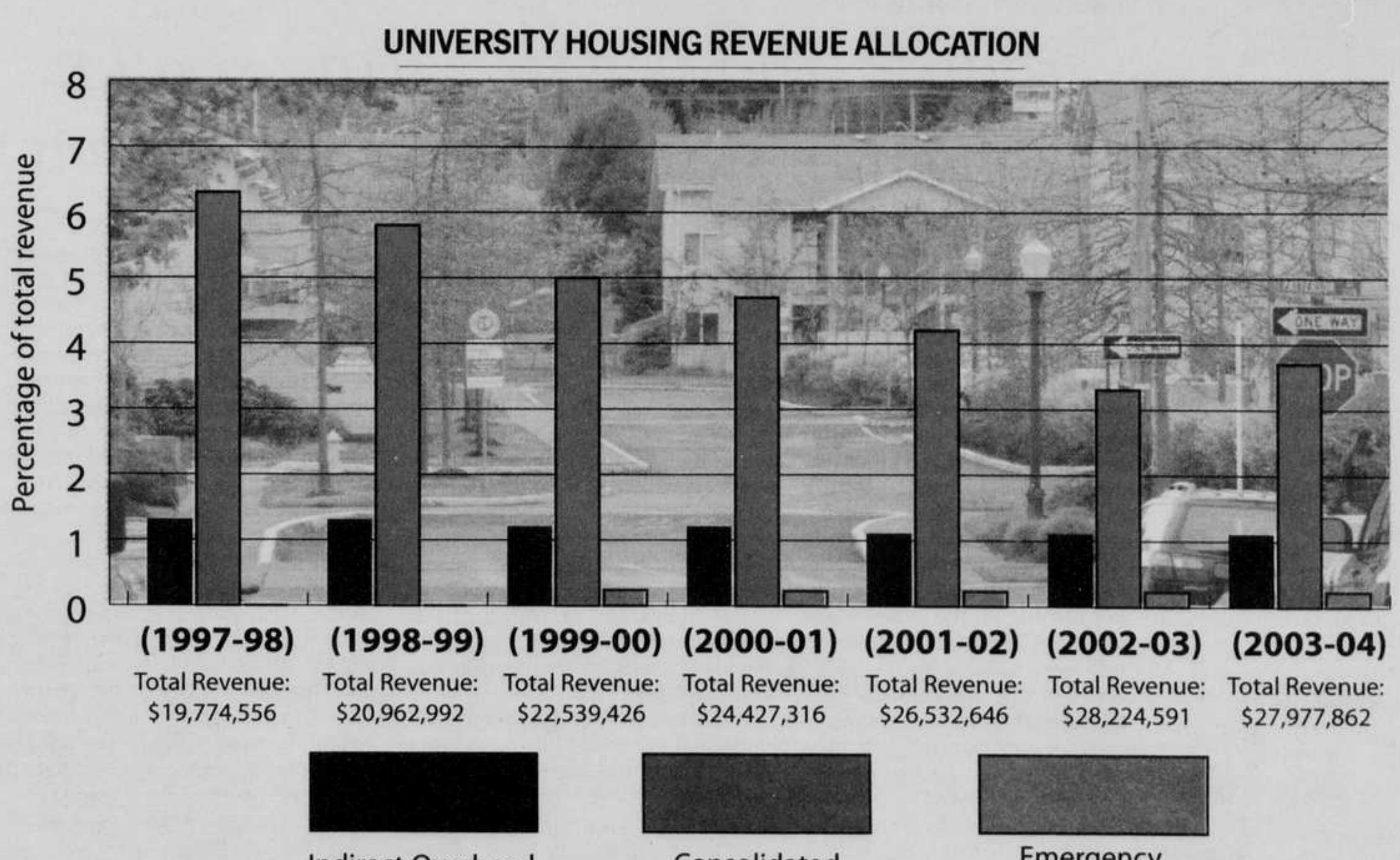

Graph by Bret Furtwangler and photo by Tim Bobosky

The colored bars represent the percentage of University Housing's total revenue that is spent on the indirect overhead assessment, the consolidated debt pool and the emergency reserve fund. Some University officials say the presence of outside financial obligations has hindered renovation of the residence halls.