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News



OSPIRG: down but not out

There may be light at the end of the tunnel for progressive group mired in controversy

Story by Joe Ireland
April 08, 2005

OSPIRG Campus Coordinator Meridith Small (right) talks with OSPIRG member Courtney Morse in the PSU OSPIRG office in the Smith Memorial Student Union.

In the middle of an unusually warm February earlier this year, the talk all over campus was OSPIRG. For the past three years, the activist group has wrangled with student

government over how much money would be allocated to their efforts at PSU. This year, after two hours of deliberation OSPIRG got its answer. No large increase, no large payout. Student government again was not swayed by the group's impassioned pleas for funding and sent them packing with thousands less than they had asked for.

Students came pouring out of the meeting crying, aghast that their efforts had failed for a third time. But it looks like the ice between the Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group (OSPIRG) and student government is thawing. Next year may be the group's big break.

Recently, OSPIRG's annual appeals for an increase in allotted funds, the Student Fee Committee has raised concerns over the groups budgeting scheme, observing a marked ambiguity therein, but the issue of college funding for PIRGs has also provoked contention on a national scale from critics who accuse the groups of funneling allotted funds off campus to their parent state and national chapters for lobbying and legislative purposes.

However, allegations of inappropriate budgeting practices have tapered since the Spring of 2003, with former Student Fee Committee Chair Tracy Earl's recent resignation, and at the prospect of a markedly PIRG-sympathetic committee line-up slated for next year, things may be turning up for USPIRG, OSPIRG's national parent chapter, and the local campus chapter.

The Portland State chapter of OSPIRG, a nonpartisan organization that, on a state and national level, lobbies on myriad progressive issues, has been scrutinized by the SFC in recent years for failing to sufficiently account for budget expenditures, echoing critics around the country that have labeled the group a covert funding source for liberal lobbying and partisanship.

Since 2003, Portland State OSPIRG has battled the Student Fee Committee over the size of its allotted annual budget, continually requesting over \$100,000 and continually being denied. They were given \$46,803 this year, a sum OSPIRG Vice Chair Amy Connolly told the Vanguard "is definitely not sufficient to be a successful organization."

However, with a seemingly more OSPIRG-sympathetic fee committee slated for next year, there may be hope for the group to receive the allotted funds for which

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they have long been appealing.

"The situation was a little disconcerting," said Mary Fletcher, a student senator slotted to be on the Student Fee Committee next year, of OSPIRG's abrupt loss of funding in 2003, "because it seemed they were being full-funded when I got here."



The Oregon State Public Interest Group building on S.E. 11th Avenue in Portland.

According to the Supreme Court's 2000 *Southworth vs. University of Wisconsin-Madison* Board of Regents ruling, mandatory fees are a permissible and constitutional means of "fostering a marketplace of ideas" on campuses, with the qualification that funds be distributed on a "viewpoint neutral" basis. Consequently, it is the fee committee's job to ensure that funds are distributed in a balanced and ideologically neutral manner

Fletcher observed a certain lack of accountability accompanying the funding process that she attends to address next year.

"The process isn't transparent," she said. "That should raise a red flag."

Meredith Small, OSPIRG Campus Organizer at PSU, defended her group, insisting that the allotted money has been accounted for and reserved solely for on-campus projects.

"We've been trying to find the real reason behind the accusations for a while," Small said. "It's been pretty shifty."

Still, throughout this year's allotment deliberations, the Student Fee Committee cited concerns over the group's budgeting process, specifically in neglecting Banner, the PSU online budget-tracking system.

"The concerns that have been raised were that they had not been using the system adequately in the past," newly-instated SFC Chair Nicole Greco said.

"It's not that it's not transparent, it's just that it's so different from other student groups' budgets," Small said.

Nonetheless, she said, the group is taking steps to meet the committee's requirements.

"We're changing that this year to be more in accordance with PSU policy because it is important for people to understand exactly where the money is going."

Still, Greco estimated that only \$5 of OSPIRG allotted funds had been accounted for on Banner thus far for this year, hardly up to par with the committee's standards.

"They have had very few transactions on their account this year," Greco said.

One of the first PIRGs was formed in 1971 by a group of University of Oregon students who, inspired by the progressive vision of consumer advocate Ralph Nader and organizer Donald Ross, wanted to advance "public interest" on campuses nationwide.

In the wake of the anti-war movement, as many activists sought new methods to

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carry their message to legislative halls and on the political front, the climate was ripe for campus-centric organizations such as the PIRGs.

"We were going to have social change, we were going to have consumer reform, we were going to have environmental reform," said Stephen McCarthy, OSPIRG's first director, of the early campus days.

McCarthy said he was disappointed when PIRG phenomena began expanding outside of the campus realm.

"Eventually it became not a student organization anymore. I did feel that was a mistake," he said, "I think they lost some of the energy that made it so good."

PIRGs have received criticism on a national scale, often for alleged misuses of student funds and resulting from their association with Nader's unsuccessful presidential campaigns.

In the Spring of 2003, freelance journalist Radley Balko published, "Nader Scams College Kids," on the Fox News web site, blasting Nader and the PIRGs for allegedly taking student money and using it for partisan lobbying purposes.

Balko said he was prompted to write the article when a PIRG began to take root at his school, Indiana University.

"They passed PIRG off as sort of a non-partisan student interest group," Balko said. "I just wanted to cast a little light on it."

Following Balko's article, a number of others began to appear on campuses with PIRGs, denouncing them for unfairly using student fees for their own ideological purposes, but since then criticisms have begun to taper off.

"I think it comes and goes. They've been doing this for thirty-some years," Balko said of the recent lack of interest in PIRG funding.

A Libertarian, Balko said he was disappointed to see that conservative groups, rather than fighting PIRG funding practices, were "just trying to utilize the same methods for their own projects."

Since the organization's inception, when the groups were successful in achieving student fees through referenda at colleges nationwide, PIRG funding has long been a source of controversy on campuses.

There have been numerous cases in which students sued their university for the right to refuse to pay mandatory fees to their campus PIRG, with wavering results.

In 1985, students at Rutgers University sued for their right not to pay student fees to the campus JYPIRG. In this case, the courts ruled in the students' favor.

Similar cases were brought to the courts in years followed, including one against the State University of New York in Albany and another at UC Berkeley in which the courts ruled in favor of the universities. In the UC Berkeley case, however, the court insisted the university offer a refund option to students ideologically opposed to CALPIRG's views.

"[The mandatory fee system] has dispensed fees on a viewpoint neutral basis," explained David French, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a group that works to preserve the rights of college students on campuses across the nation.

"They cannot look at the ideological outlook of the group," he said.

However, French insisted there is a fundamental flaw in the student fee process, as it stands today.

"It has to be fixed," French said. "The students and the individuals that are distributing the fees are not aware of the law."

French said he thinks funds are being distributed too often as a product of biases and favoritism, a direct violation of the Supreme Court's ruling.

"It is absolutely the way so many student activity funds are dispensed now," he said. "When campus after campus pays huge sums to one side and not the other you begin to wonder."

Favoritism and imbalances, he said, are simply unavoidable when a group of people are doling out funds to a certain number of groups.

"Is it possible for them to give money out even-handedly year after year after year?" he asked. "I don't know any example of that."

Nonetheless, Greco supports the process as it stands.

"I feel confident in all the decisions I've made this year," Greco said.

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