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Students, administration clash over bus passes

By Will Dodds

PITTSBURGH—Duquesne students are livid following the University administration's rejection of a proposal last month that would have given Pittsburgh Port Authority unlimited ridership bus passes to all University students and staff members.

Duquesne's Student Government Association had been working since the spring 2010 semester to establish a contract between the University and the Port Authority, but their latest proposal was denied on Oct. 5 by a University Board of Directors because of financial reasons.

The proposed contract would have required Duquesne to pay the Port Authority \$1.2 million during the first year of their partnership, an expense that would have been covered by an additional \$100 on each student's tuition, according to SGA.

Jeff Wright, a freshman political science major at Duquesne, said students would benefit from having Port Authority bus passes.

"It's totally worth it," said Wright. "It's so much more convenient. I'm totally on board. If it's only \$100... I'd pay myself if I had to."

Unless Wright gets his Port Authority pass through the University, he'll never find an unlimited ridership pass for that price. An annual pass for Port Authority transportation costs \$880 for a Pittsburgh resident.

The University administration has argued that the numbers of SGA's proposed contract with the Port Authority are deceiving.

If the Port Authority and the University were to come to an agreement, Duquesne's annual payment would increase to \$1.4 million in the second year of their contract, according to SGA. This price would likely increase in years beyond.

According to Dave DiPetro, Duquesne's Executive Director of Auxiliary Services, the University determined that not enough Duquesne students use Port Authority transportation to justify the price.

In an email sent to *The Duke*, DiPetro said that the deal is "not the right fit for the University."

James Regar, President of SGA and a driving force behind its proposal for bus passes to a Duquesne Board of Directors, is not satisfied with DiPetro's justification.

"I don't think they had a strong enough argument," Regar said.

Regar argued that bus passes would help decongest Duquesne's overcrowded parking lots, as well as work towards the environmental sustainability goals set for the University in their 2010-2015 Strategic Plan. He also disagrees with the University's conclusion that not enough students use Port Authority transportation.

According to College View, an online encyclopedia for colleges nationwide, 30% of Duquesne's student population lives on campus.

Regar argued that not only would the University's large commuter population use the unlimited ridership passes, but on-campus residents would, too.

"What freshman wouldn't want a bus pass? I challenge you to find one," said Regar. "Many students are required to leave campus daily for clinicals, or rotations, or internships."

Olivia Letzkus, a freshman pharmacy major at Duquesne, wishes she had an unlimited ridership pass. A resident of Monroeville, Letzkus frequently uses the bus to get home and to visit friends throughout Pittsburgh. She also said a lot of the people she knows at Duquesne use Port Authority transportation.

"It adds up after a while," Letzkus said of paying the Port Authority bus fare, which costs \$2 for one-way transportation and an extra \$0.75 for a transfer ticket. "[The pass] would save me so much money."

According to DiPetro, the University is in the process of researching how many Duquesne students regularly use Port Authority transportation.

"We're trying to find a way to accurately determine that number," DiPetro said.

Regar is also frustrated by the fact that other area colleges, such as the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and Chatham University, provide their students with unlimited Port Authority transportation passes, while Duquesne does not.

Pitt, a state-related University with over 30,000 students and staff members, first struck a deal with the Port Authority in 1998 that gave their student population unlimited transportation passes. Pitt is paying the Port Authority \$5.9 million for the passes for the 2010-11 year, and campus residents pay a \$180 security, safety, and transportation fee as part of their tuition to help finance this expense.

CMU, a smaller, private university like Duquesne, is paying Port Authority \$1.3 million this year for unlimited ridership. CMU Students finance this cost with a \$46 transportation fee as part of their tuition.

According to College Prowler, though, a website that describes itself as having the "only college guides written for students by students," there might not be such a great gap between transportation accessibility at Duquesne and other Pittsburgh universities.

College Prowler evaluates transportation at schools across the country based on campus-provided transportation, access to modes of long-distance transportation, the necessity of a car on campus, the cost and convenience of campus shuttles, etc., according to their

website. They use student survey responses, open-ended student reviews, and statistical data to conduct their evaluations.

College Prowler gives Pitt an A+, CMU an A-, and Duquesne also an A- for transportation accessibility at each respective school.

Regardless, Regar remains staunch in his demand for University-wide bus passes at Duquesne. He's discouraged, however, at the lack of progress that has been made between Duquesne and the Port Authority.

Following the University administration's denial of SGA's proposed contract with the Port Authority, a month ago, Regar made a personal appeal to Duquesne University President Charles Dougherty regarding the student bus passes. The University has not made any further changes to their initial decision.

President Dougherty and Stephen Schillo, Duquesne's Vice President for Management and Business did not return any calls for comment.

Meanwhile, negotiations between Duquesne and the Port Authority have deteriorated. For DiPetro, the fact that the Port Authority is currently undergoing a significant crisis is a problem.

In November, the Port Authority announced that within two months it will cut 35% of their service. Beginning next year, bus fares will also increase by \$0.25 for Pittsburgh residents.

"We don't like the fact that they're cutting their service and [the deal's] still the same price," said DiPetro. "It's easy money for them."

According to Jim Ritchie, a spokesperson for the Port Authority, discussions have hit a wall.

"Last I heard, the ball was in Duquesne's court," Ritchie said.

Regar, however, said he's not ready to give up. If he can't get Duquesne University bus passes, he's already contemplated further plans of action.

"There may only be two options left—a student petition and a protest," said Regar.