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UIS students being asked to pay for construction of student center

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University of Illinois Springfield students will vote later this month on whether to increase student fees to build a student union on the UIS campus.

"The student union is the primary intersection and the living room of a campus," said Derek Felix, the UIS student representative on the U of I board of trustees and co-chairman of the project.

The student-driven proposal would be funded by an increase in fees of up to \$200 per semester for full-time students and \$100 per semester for part-time ones. A referendum on the proposal will be held in conjunction with the UIS Student Government Association elections April 28-29.

Voting takes place online through the UIS homepage at www.uis.edu.

Felix told about 40 students who attended a forum on the proposal that the SGA has worked on the project for about eight months.

"We've tried to determine the best mix of space," he said.

The project — estimated to cost \$17 million — would include a lounge, a ballroom or "great hall," recreation/entertainment space and a small convenience store. Among other things being considered are a "school spirit" store selling UIS apparel and other items; lockers where commuter students could keep their books and materials; space for student organizations; a grill and coffee shop; and a game room that might contain billiards tables and video games.

Donors could lower fee hike

Felix and SGA vice president Charles Olivier said organizers looked at student unions on other four-year campuses to see what they offered.

Two things the UIS facility won't have are a bowling alley, which was considered but deemed to expensive to build and to operate; and a franchise restaurant, such as McDonald's or Subway, again because of the cost.

Preliminary plans call for a 46,000-square-foot building on two levels. It would be south of the colonnade and north of Kiwanis Stadium on Richard Wright Drive.

"It would be centrally located and a place where everybody could go to hang out," Felix said.

Stephen Chrans, assistant vice chancellor for student affairs, said the union would serve as a hub of student activity and "would complete a full college experience for our students."

"We've got some young, talented folks who are interested in doing this for the future," he said of the students organizing the project.

Students at the forum got to see general sketches of what the building might look like. The sketches "show what's possible" and aren't meant to be final plans, Felix said.

"I'm sure the architects, when they are hired, will want as much student input as possible," he said.

Felix said hours for the proposed student union haven't been determined, but organizers realize the need for something open past midnight. A student union also would result in more on-campus jobs, he said.

As currently proposed, only student fees would fund the project. If private donors can be found, the assessment could be less.

Failed vote tables plan

If the referendum is successful, the proposal would go before the U of I board for various approvals, including OKs for the financing, design and construction.

Implementation of the new fee schedule would take effect in summer 2011. Summer term assessments would be \$100 for full-time students and \$50 for part-timers. Online degree-seeking students wouldn't be assessed the fee.

General student fees at UIS will be \$628.50 per semester for full-time students in the fall. Referendum approval would push that total to \$828.50.

If everything goes as planned, the building would open in fall 2013.

Some students who would pay fees toward the union would graduate before it opens. As alumni, however, any student who paid the student union fee before the building opened would receive other benefits, such as free semesters of The Recreation and Athletic Center (TRAC) membership.

Felix said he expects a heavy voter turnout.

"I think there will be a lot of students vote," he said. He said a similar referendum on funding for the TRAC drew 300 to 350 voters and was approved by a 2-to-1 margin.

If the referendum fails, the project will be dropped until someone brings it up again, Felix said.

"But if we wait five or 10 years, we will get substantially less for the money," he said.

Chris Dettro can be reached at 788-1510.

Want to know more?

The Student Government Association is hosting three more meetings for students to learn about the plan. They are at: 9:30 p.m. Monday, April 19, in the Lincoln Residence Hall Great Room; 4:30 p.m. Thursday, April 22, at the Food Emporium; and 9:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 27, at the student center.

What students think

* Jackqueline Pace, sophomore: "I'd have to pay the fee and probably wouldn't utilize it. I haven't used the student center."

* Nick Hanscom, senior: "A student union would do well, especially for this campus, which is a smaller campus far away from the mall and things like that. But I think \$200 a semester is too steep."

* Casey Thorpe, senior: "I think having a student union is really important for a campus to grow. When you take out loans like I do, it's not hard to take out another \$200."

* Neil Buono, senior: "A student union would be a better meeting place. I'd like to see it back-loaded in costs on those who would use it. It would be good for everyone."