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UMass GOP seeks refund after speech

Club claims protests derailed event, wants $444 back from school

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Tuesday, April 7, 2009

AMHERST - The University of Massachusetts' Republican Club is seeking reimbursement from the campus' administration for a speech canceled several weeks ago due to disruptive protests.

With the help of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), the club sent a letter to Chancellor Robert Holub requesting that UMass return $444.52 the club was charged by the university for three additional police officers, who were called due to a large number of protesters at the event.

On March 11, conservative pundit Don Feder, a former columnist for the Boston Herald and editorial director of sports radio WEEI, was scheduled to give a lecture - hosted by the Republican Club - on hate crime legislation. However, Feder ended the speech, which was supposed to last around an hour and a half, after being repeatedly interrupted during the first 15 minutes.

"The university failed to uphold its end of the bargain, which is to provide enough security for the event to go on," said Adam Kissel, director of FIRE's Individual Rights Defense Program.

Kissel said by the university allowing the speech to be disrupted - and subsequently canceled - is a violation of First Amendment rights and that charging the club for extra security is unconstitutional.

"It could be that the administration didn't know (they were violating the club's rights) or it could be they did and took advantage of the Republican Club," he said.

Charles T. Peterson, a member of the UMass Coalition Against Hate and the UMass International Socialist Organization, who protested at Feder's speech, said the Republican Club should not be reimbursed.

"Don Feder put down his microphone and decided not to continue his speech," he said "It seems to me that (the Republican Club) went out of their way to get a lot of people there and they succeeded, so they should be held responsible."

A letter sent from FIRE to the chancellor gives UMass until April 14 to respond.

"We have received that letter and we're in process of reviewing the matter," said university spokesman Ed Blaguszewski.

After the April 14 deadline, if the group has not heard from the university, it plans to consider a federal lawsuit against UMass for the event's entire cost of around $3,500, according to Brad DeFlumeri, vice president of the Republican Club.

The pricetag includes the cost for renting the room where the speech was held, advertisement, security, fliers and the money paid to bring Feder to speak.

During an afternoon "Rally for Free Speech" hosted by the Republican Club at the Student Union last Wednesday, around 100 copies of The Minuteman newspaper were allegedly taken from a Minuteman distributor's hands and ripped up by students protesting in front of UMass Police Detective Lisa Kidwell.

DeFlumeri, who is also the co-managing editor of The Minuteman, a monthly, student-run conservative newspaper, which is printed by The Silent Majority group, said obstructing the distribution of a newspaper is a violation of First Amendment rights.

The Minuteman is executing a complaint through FIRE to the university and the UMass Police

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The Minuteman is executing a complaint through FIRE to the university and the UMass Police Department aimed at holding the students who took the newspapers responsible.

"Apparently the university told The Minuteman that since the papers are free, people can take as many as they like and do with them what they like," said Kissel, who described the protesters' actions as theft.

Blaguszewski said a police report was filed and are looking into the incident.

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