Job worries trouble MU department

Administrators won’t confirm outsource plan.

By Janese Heavin

Thursday, September 17, 2009

Some University of Missouri employees have been worried for months about the future of their jobs, and system administration’s silence about the situation isn’t helping.

About 100 information technology workers in MU’s health system fear their work is about to be outsourced to Kansas City-based Cerner Corp., one of the largest suppliers of health care information technology. Cerner already provides products to the university’s hospitals and has an educational partnership with the MU School of Medicine.

Fueling those fears was a UM Board of Curators closed meeting yesterday with MU Health Care CEO Jim Ross, interim medical school Dean Robert Churchill and several unidentified men. UM System President Gary Forsee would not say what the meeting was about.

Employees, speaking on the condition they would not be identified for fear of their jobs, have heard different Cerner-related stories from their supervisors, and office rumors are flying.

“The workplace is miserable,” one employee said. “We come in every day not knowing if we’re going to have a job in five months.”

Supervisors are aware of their concerns but have not alleviated fears. That might be because mid-level managers also are out of the loop, some said.

George Carr, chief information officer for MU Health, canceled a regular staff meeting this month that might have shed light on the situation.

“I am going to postpone the town hall for a little while until we can cover the status of the Tiger Institute (MU/Cerner Partnership) with some certainty,” Carr wrote in an e-mail to staff that the Tribune obtained. He went on to say: “I do realize that this is a huge issue to everyone, and so I want to make sure we spend our time wisely and get the results we need.”

Employees said it was the first time they’d heard the name “Tiger Institute.”
The workers fear they will either become Cerner employees and lose their university benefits or that their jobs will be cut. Forsee would not comment on those speculations.

The agenda of yesterday’s board meeting said curators would be taking a vote, but Forsee and Chairman Bo Fraser of Columbia declined to give details about any action taken because the meeting fell under the closed session exceptions in Missouri’s Open Meetings and Records Law.

The law allows votes on contracts to be closed until a contract is executed.

The Tribune attempted to obtain correspondence between Forsee and Cerner, but an open-records request was denied.

“The documents that you have requested are considered closed records, as they fall fully within the exemptions” of the law, system Chief of Staff David Russell said in an e-mail. “These two sections pertain respectively to the protection of ‘confidential or privileged communications between a public governmental body or its representatives and its attorneys’ and ‘any documents related to a negotiated contract until a contract is executed.’”

Asked about that request yesterday, Forsee would not elaborate and replied: “We’re done here.”

Forsee has a business history with Cerner. He is a former CEO at Sprint, which has had a partnership with Cerner for years. Forsee and Cerner CEO Neal Patterson serve on at least two boards together.

There’s federal money at stake, too. The stimulus package allocates a sizable amount of funding to efforts that would provide “meaningful use” of electronic health records. Cerner is estimating $35 billion in Medicare and Medicaid incentives are available to hospitals for updates to electronic health records, according to its Web site.

The site says Cerner “will continue to work with clients to help them meet the ‘meaningful use’ and other requirements of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.”

Last week, the Kansas City Star reported that Cerner expects to hire 12,000 additional employees by 2020 and is building a new 600,000-square-foot office development in Kansas City, Kan.

Some employees believe Cerner and UM will make an announcement next month at Cerner’s corporate conference in Kansas City. The annual event is scheduled for Oct. 4 through 7, and Patterson is expected to give a closing address. Cerner officials were not available for comment yesterday and today.

They fear it’s too late for them to stop changes, but at this point, employees said they just want answers. The silence “makes it tough,” one worker said. “How can you fight against something you know little about?”

Another worker said higher-ups have allowed rumors to run rampant. “That’s not good for business,” he said. “That’s not good for morale. That’s not good for anybody.”
MU students join coal rally

Protesters call for cleaner fuel.

Sophomore Caitlin Reader pours out bags of charcoal briquettes Wednesday during a protest at Speakers Circle on the University of Missouri campus. The protest was part of a national Sierra Club campaign to reduce reliance on coal for energy.

By Janese Heavin

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About 15 University of Missouri students joined in a Sierra Club rally against coal yesterday, calling for college campuses to be leaders in renewable energy use.

Sophomore Joe Bohm of St. Louis has black cream makeup put on his face by Addie Schnurbusch Wednesday at Speakers Circle on the University of Missouri campus during a protest against burning coal for power. The paint was meant to simulate coal ash.

The Speakers Circle event was one of 60 being held at colleges nationwide and coincided with the release of a Sierra Club report challenging universities to eliminate coal use.

Specifically, the report cited MU’s use of more than 48,900 tons of coal for electricity generation in 2007. By comparison, Indiana University used 68,000 tons of coal in 2006, according to the report, while Ohio University used 31,000 tons and the University of North Carolina used 11,900 tons in 2007.

"University campuses should be leaders in technological innovation and sustainability," said Ryan Doyle, a graduate of St. Olaf College in Minnesota and an organizer for Green Corps. "They should be places of learning, development and growth where students can thrive — not homes to polluting 19th-century technology."

MU sophomore Sky Robinson said colleges are an ideal place to begin using renewable energy sources because students can join administrators to influence higher-level decision-makers.

"We know that by winning visible victories to move beyond coal at the university level, we can inspire a transition off of coal and over to clean fuels all across America," she said.

And because MU owns its own power source, it can be even more influential in leading the charge, she said. "Having our own power plant on campus is truly an asset," Robinson said. "It gives us the ability to not only be self-sufficient in our electricity and heat generation, but also to choose what types of fuels we want to provide power to our campus buildings — and that choice should not include coal."

It is possible to completely move away from coal use, but it’s going to take time, said Steve Burdic, MU’s coordinator of sustainability.
"We are looking at biomass boiler use and are reducing coal through the use of biomass and alternative fuel sources," he said. "With those plans, by 2012, we expect to reduce about 25 percent" of coal use. "The real point here is we’ve reduced the amount of coal we use, but we’re not going to be able to stop doing it tomorrow. It’s going to take a long time to completely get rid of coal."

Students at the rally praised university administrators for taking those steps but said more should be done.

"We have an opportunity to create clean-energy jobs, clean up our air and water and solve the climate challenge by moving away from coal," senior Mallory Schillinger said. "Mizzou should be investing in the future, not tied to the past. A clean-energy campus — now that’s an alma mater I could be proud of."

Reach Janese Heavin at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jheavin@columbiatribune.com.
MU, Moberly agreement meant to ease student transfer

By Carla Jimenez
September 18, 2009 | 12:01 a.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — A new deal between MU and Moberly Area Community College aims to ease the mental and academic transition from two-year to four-year programs for students.

MACC President Evelyn Jorgenson and MU Provost Brian Foster signed an agreement for the Mizzou Connection Program on Thursday. Students accepted to the free program will be eligible for personalized mentoring, early MU advising and early registration while they still attend Moberly.

This is the first such program at MU and extends to three of the community college's six sites: Moberly, Columbia and Mexico, Mo.

"We want to make sure we are making the transition the easiest it can be," said Terry Barnes, MU assistant provost for community college partnerships.

The program is meant to improve academic advising, to make transferring credits easier and to offer opportunities at MU to incoming students.

On average, 25 percent of MACC graduates show intent to attend MU based on the number of transcripts the college sends to MU, said James Grant, dean of students for the college. In May, the college had 241 graduates.

Right now, MACC has more than 5,000 students, up 29 percent from last year, said Jaime Morgans, director of marketing and public relations. Its Columbia location, 1805 E. Walnut St., has 1,700 students, up 26 percent from last year. Classes are held there, at Stephens College and at MU "because we just don't have the room," Morgans said.
Jorgenson said she hopes the Mizzou Connection Program will encourage more community college students to transfer to four-year degree programs.

"The process can be complicated and confusing," she said. With the program, she hopes "the students will feel more comfortable."

Foster said he hopes the program will strengthen the relationship between Moberly and MU.

"Mizzou Connection will enable people to do what's right for them," Foster said at the signing in the lobby of Jesse Hall. He said he wants to make the transfer possible for someone who is committed to a four-year degree.

Under the agreement, MU will host a Mizzou Connection Day each semester for the participants. This will give students interested in the program an opportunity to learn more about its benefits. Advisers from MU and the community college will be on hand to help students in schedule planning.

To be eligible for the program, a Moberly student must have a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 upon completion of an associate of arts degree and a 2.5 GPA if he or she plans to transfer before completion of the associate's degree. The student must also complete 24 credits, including a C grade in college algebra or English composition II.

In addition to advising and mentoring, students in the program will be able to use MU's library system and recreational facilities and will receive periodic e-mails on special lectures, recitals and cultural events at MU.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Farewell Pepper: TV host signs off Friday

By ALAN SCHER ZAGIER/ The Associated Press
September 17, 2009 | 11:08 a.m. CDT

COLUMBIA—The kids' corner will soon be kid-free. The dogs in the adopt-a-pet segment will bark no more. The cooking demos, musical interludes and interviews with community leaders? Kaput.

For 27 years, central Missouri television viewers turned to "Pepper & Friends" for a daily dose of small-town miscellany. On Friday, the morning variety show — a dying breed in the digital era — bids farewell for good, the victim of a cost-cutting move at KOMU-TV, a commercial station owned by MU.

From Moberly to Montgomery City, Lake of the Ozarks to Sedalia, the show served as a community beacon for small-town community groups, social clubs and civic organizations.

The decision, announced in May, has been greeted with a flurry of protests by Pepper's loyal legions. Demonstrators marched at the Jesse Hall office of university Chancellor Brady Deaton. Program sponsors vowed to yank their advertising dollars.

On Monday, 15 Pepper supporters held a mock funeral on campus, reading the names of hundreds of past guests from a "death scroll."

"I think they had no idea how this show was a community network," said Missouri geography instructor Larry Brown, a local activist and frequent guest. "Again and again, people have thought of this show as 'our show,' not Paul's show."

Pepper, 63, joined KOMU 40 years ago as a booth announcer. He spent several decades as the station's weatherman but has focused exclusively on the morning show since the early '90s.
Along with his on-air sidekick, James Mouser, Pepper's TV persona radiates a sunny disposition with a casual familiarity. At a recent taping, a producer's hearty laugh could be heard off-camera as the co-hosts joked with their stage-prop mascot, a disembodied mannequin head.

Pepper has grown more combative in the weeks leading up to the cancellation, openly challenging his university bosses and station general manager Marty Siddall.

"This was a good way to hide, with the economic downturn, to get rid of the show," said Pepper, a Jefferson County native born Paul Urzi who embraced the stage name bestowed for his fiery personality. "It's not the money. They just don't want the show. And that's closing out the entire community."

Siddall says the program costs about $222,000 annually but generates $74,000 less in advertising revenue. A pair of tabloid entertainment shows — "Access Hollywood" and "The Insider" — will replace "Pepper and Friends" in the time slot.

Pepper said he offered to help reduce the show's costs by $55,000 and accept a $25,000 salary (he earns $67,458 annually in wages and benefits), with Mouser taking a 35 percent pay cut. The appeal was ignored.

Pepper and Mouser said they were asked to provide supportive comments to be used with a public statement explaining the university's decision. Both refused.

The station, an NBC affiliate, serves as a teaching lab for students from the Missouri School of Journalism, who serve as reporters and producers on KOMU news broadcasts while working alongside industry professionals. Its operations are self-supported through advertising income, with no state or university money used.

"It is KOMU's continued financial viability that allows us to provide the necessary technology and learning opportunities for these students," the statement noted.

Among the alternatives proposed by Brown and others was a hybrid program that would combine the hometown approach of "Pepper and Friends" with a more news-driven look at university research and newsmakers.

Siddall, who joined the station a decade ago, said he was surprised by the vociferous objections to the decision. He noted that rather than pull the plug on the show without
warning, he allowed Pepper and Mouser an extended farewell after the announcement so they can pay a "respectful goodbye."
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MU hires football ushers to solve problems with student seating

By Greg Mitchell
September 18, 2009 | 12:01 a.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — This Saturday at Memorial Stadium, the "sea of gold" in the student section will be dotted with lime-green.

The MU athletics department has hired 40 new ushers, clad in lime-green, to alleviate problems with this season's switch from student assigned seating to general admission.

"Any time you switch a system, there will be kinks," said Chad Moeller, the department spokesman. "We know it wasn't perfect, and we are making corrections."

Last year, students were assigned a seat. This year, the department created one area designated for student general admission. Students, however, were wandering into pockets of nonstudent assigned seating in that section at last week's game against Bowling Green State University, Moeller said.

He said the ushers would help "streamline the process of getting in."

Other changes for students include:

- They can only enter through two of the stadium's 11 gates, 3E and 4E
- They must present a valid MU student ID
- They receive a color-coded wristband correlating to group seating areas within the general admission section
- Space allotted for each person has decreased from 18 inches to 14

As a result, Moeller said Memorial Stadium's capacity has risen from 68,349 to 71,004. The athletics department site states that about 13,000 students can sit in the stands this year.
MU senior Tyler Kunce, who has gone to games for three years, said he didn't like the changes to student seating and that entering the gate was especially problematic.

"It was a big-time holdup getting in," he said. "It took 10 minutes to start moving up the line."

Kunce also said showing up early to get a good seat takes away from tailgating before games.

The 40 ushers have been added to the game-day staff, whose numbers were already increased after last season. Moeller said he thinks adding the ushers will be helpful for spectators, security and everyone else.

Moeller said most major conference schools use general admission seating. That change and the decrease in seating space were recommended by the MU Student Advisory Group for Intercollegiate Athletics.

According to the department's Web site, the group is made up of the Missouri Student Association, Interfraternity Council, Graduate Professional Council and "other student groups."

"You can get more people in, and that's what the students wanted," Moeller said. "The fact (that) they stand during games makes it really not that big a factor."