'Cotton ball' charges are still pending
By Tim O'Neil
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The prosecutor in Columbia, Mo., who is considering charges against two university students in the "cotton ball" case said Tuesday he had told them to meet a condition that will determine what charges will be filed.

Zachary E. Tucker, 21, a senior from the St. Louis area, and freshman Sean D. Fitzgerald, 19, of western Missouri, were suspended for allegedly throwing cotton balls across the front lawn of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center, at the University of Missouri at Columbia, on Feb. 26. An arraignment had been scheduled for Monday at the Boone County Courthouse in Columbia but was postponed.

The students were arrested on suspicion of a felony hate crime. But Ryan Haigh, assistant county prosecutor, said his office held off seeking formal charges.

"We have placed a condition on the individuals as a show of good faith, and whether they fulfill that will have a bearing on our decision," Haigh said. He declined to be more specific.

Christopher A. Slusher, lawyer for Tucker, said he believed Haigh was referring to one of several things that Tucker promised during the university disciplinary procedure. Slusher said Tucker will meet with leaders and students at the Black Culture Center after spring break, taking place this week, and will write a paper about a visit to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tenn.

That museum includes the Lorraine Motel, where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

"This will be another opportunity for my client to apologize," Slusher said. The students issued an apology shortly after their release on bond.

Slusher said Tucker agreed to withdraw from the university this semester and return in the fall.

After the incident, Black Culture Center coordinator Nathan Stephens said students were offended because of the "symbolic violence" of cotton balls, harkening to the days of slavery on cotton plantations.
MU program aims for jobs in green energy

By Janese Heavin

Tuesday, March 30, 2010

The University of Missouri has been tapped to help establish academic programs across the state to train workers for the emerging green energy industry.

MU received $4 million of a $6 million grant that went to the Missouri Division of Workforce Development in January as part of the federal stimulus package.

The money will fund a three-year project led by nuclear engineering Professor William Miller. The MU project team will be tasked with evaluating the skills needed to install, operate and maintain renewable energy equipment such as wind mills and solar panels, Miller said.

Members also will review existing curricula used to prepare workers in energy fields and align that with additional on-the-job know-how that’s needed. That ultimately should “create a streamlined path for students,” Gayla Neumeyer, who works with the MU Research Reactor Center, said in a prepared statement.

The team will develop materials to disseminate to a network of community colleges, including Linn State Technical College, Crowder College in Neosho, Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City, St. Charles Community College and St. Louis Community College.

Miller said it will be up to individual schools to deem whether those materials fit into existing programs or to use them to create new majors or minors.

The project is modeled after a similar training effort in the nuclear energy field, Miller said. The nuclear business offset a generation of retiring technicians by establishing learning objectives and boosting enrollment of students interested in those jobs.

The challenge in green energy industries, Miller said, is that the technologies are emerging and the skill set is not as well defined yet.

“We’ll be talking to folks in those fields to find out what they need,” he said.
City revising sewer-billing deal with MU

University would pay less in proposed fix of inequity.

By T.J. Greaney

Tuesday, March 30, 2010

Discussion of how to bridge a $500,000 gap in Columbia municipal sewer bills owed by the University of Missouri has continued nearly two years since the city struck a deal with MU to increase its fees over a 10-year period.

For decades, a billing mistake allowed the university to pay only a single base fee — now $6.09 per month — for its entire Columbia campus despite utilizing more than 8,100 sewer hookups. A meeting between Public Works Director John Glascock and university officials in July 2008 ended with an agreement that MU would “ramp up” payments to the sewer utility in the next decade, eventually eliminating the annual shortfall of more than $515,000. In the next two years, MU upped its monthly sewer payments by $10,000.

But an e-mail discussion released yesterday by city Public Information Director Toni Messina revealed that their solution was not set in stone.

In a March 24 e-mail from Glascock to City Manager Bill Watkins, Glascock proposed a new arrangement: MU would take full responsibility for maintenance and repairs on its 11 miles of sewer lines — something it already does — in exchange for being billed in a special class of sewer users.

Under the new arrangement, Glascock proposed that MU be treated as a “wholesale customer” getting billed for 80 percent of its total bill. Glascock said the arrangement would be similar to an existing city agreement in place with the Boone County Regional Sewer District.

“What we’re trying to do is to treat them just like we do the Boone County Regional Sewer District for when we hook up a subdivision that they have. This is how they’re billed,” Glascock said in an interview.

Furthermore, Glascock suggested that MU be charged a base fee for each of its 185 water accounts instead of the 8,100 sewer hookups identified in the 2007 report. This would make up about $13,500 of the shortfall a year, much less than MU was previously believed to owe the city.
Glascock said the 2007 cost-of-service study that was the basis for MU’s $515,000 agreement did not take into account that MU spends more than $225,000 a year to maintain its sewer system. Glascock said a new arrangement would give MU credit for that expenditure and codify the university’s responsibility for sewer upkeep by stressing the need to keep stormwater out of the sanitary sewer system.

“They didn’t have any incentive to maintain their system” in the past, “and that’s what I’m trying to do is get them to maintain their system and get the leaks out of it, which we call ‘I and I’ — inflow and infiltration.” Glascock said.

Any new agreement between the city and MU over sewer fees must win approval by the Columbia City Council.

Gary Ward, MU associate vice chancellor for facilities, endorsed the switch. “We will continue to maintain and repair our own lines,” he said in an e-mail. “While we have not yet reached a formal agreement, MU supports the city’s proposal to consider us a wholesale customer and charge us accordingly.”

MU already employs full-time staff and owns equipment to maintain its sewer lines. MU occasionally hires city workers to help when its equipment isn’t large enough for a job. Those jobs are billed separately from monthly MU bills.

The regional sewer district, the city’s other wholesale customer, maintains about 95 miles of sewer lines that are mostly outside Columbia. Unlike the proposal for MU, the sewer district pays a monthly base fee for each of the 3,182 separate sewer hookups to “livable units” on its system.

Glascock’s proposal, conversely, would allow MU to only pay base fees for its 185 water accounts.

All sewer customers including wholesale customers must also pay $1.44 per 100 cubic feet of sewage, waste or water discharged into the sewer system. That charge would remain in place in the revised MU deal.

But the apparent inequity of the city’s treatment of MU has generated grumbling among apartment-building owners, including many who were slammed with sewer rate hikes of thousands of dollars in spring 2008, said Mark Stevenson, president of the Columbia Apartment Association.

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Charges pending in cotton ball case

Tuesday, March 30, 2010

Charges have yet to be filed against the two University of Missouri students who have admitted to throwing cotton balls in front of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center on campus.

Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Ryan Haigh said Zachary Tucker and Sean Fitzgerald have a chance to meet certain obligations as a “showing of good faith.” He would not specify what those tasks include, but Haigh said the outcome of meeting those obligations “will have significant bearing on which charges we file.”

Haigh said the first opportunity to meet those obligations will be next week, which means charges likely won’t be filed until later in the week.

Tucker and Fitzgerald acknowledged through their respective attorneys that they littered the lawn of the black culture center in the early morning hours of Feb. 26, the same night they participated in a string of pranks on campus. MU police arrested them on suspicion of tampering, upgraded to a felony with the classification of a hate crime.

Tucker’s attorney, Christopher Slusher, told the Tribune last week that Tucker willingly withdrew from MU until next fall and that he has agreed to do community service.
MU hydrogen car perseveres for prize

Tuesday, March 30, 2010

The University of Missouri's Hydrogen Car Team took home an award from the Shell Eco-marathon Americas competition in Houston over the weekend.

Members earned the Perseverance in the Face of Adversity Award for having a “can-do” attitude, said marathon organizers.

The MU team entered Tigergen II in the competition's Urban Concept category, which showcased hydrogen-powered vehicles with traditional car parts.

Forty-two student teams competed in the eco-marathon, which challenged fuel-efficient vehicles to travel the farthest distance using the least amount of energy. For the second consecutive year, a team from Mater Dei High School in Evansville, Ind., won the grand prize in the Urban Concept category for traveling 437 miles per gallon.

The competition also allowed futuristic vehicles to enter the Prototype Category. Laval University in Quebec won that challenge, traveling 2,487 miles per gallon.
Help to the Finish Line: Ways to Reduce the Number of Ph.D. Dropouts

By David Glenn

Doctoral students in the United States are finishing their degrees faster than at any point since at least 1983. But that's not actually saying much. Their average time-to-degree is still a formidable 7.7 years—and that, of course, is for the students who manage to finish at all. By some estimates, more than 30 percent of the students who enter American doctoral programs walk away empty-handed.

A report that will be released Wednesday by the Council of Graduate Schools highlights some of what the council calls "promising practices" that might reduce attrition rates and average time-to-degree. The report draws on data from more than 20 universities that have taken part in the council's Ph.D. Completion Project, a seven-year study of doctoral-program attrition—especially the attrition of women and underrepresented minorities.

The new document is the fourth in a series of reports about the completion project. While the previous entries focused on quantitative analyses, the latest report is devoted to anecdotal accounts of the steps that the participating universities have taken to help their students get through the labyrinth.

The practices described in the report include:

- Improving advising and mentorship. Ohio State University's doctoral program in history has given its faculty members detailed instructions about how to keep an eye on their advisees. Each year, the advisers are required to hold specific "landmark conferences" with every student. The University of Missouri at Columbia, meanwhile, has created "colleague circles," in which each new doctoral student receives guidance from a group of more-advanced students.

- Increasing financial support. The report cites Brown University and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, among other institutions, as having created effective fellowship models that relieve some students' burdens of money and time. The recipients of Michigan's Rackham Engineering Awards, which are intended primarily to serve
members of underrepresented minorities, have remained in graduate school at higher rates than the general graduate-student population, according to the report.

- Improving students' early research experiences. Pennsylvania State University at University Park and the University of Cincinnati have reworked their science programs so that doctoral students get into laboratories faster. Michigan State University's plant-biology department is studying whether students seem to do better when they work in a single lab, or when they sample a variety of lab experiences early in their graduate-school careers.

- Improving support and supervision during the dissertation phase. The report praises a "dissertation boot camp" at Marquette University and a similar effort at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

The council's Ph.D. Completion Project is just one of several recent national studies of the health of doctoral education. Other recent entries in this genre include reports supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The three reports emphasize different points, but all agree that universities are missing opportunities to lower their attrition rates.

But the most-awaited report on American graduate education, the National Research Council's analyses and assessments of doctoral programs, remains in a holding pattern. The research council has not made any public statements since last summer about when that report might be released.