

Fresno students, others work to save busing program. Most elected trustees are silent

By Monica Velez

Fresno Bee, Friday, Feb. 28, 2020

The clock is ticking for hundreds of Fresno-area college students who are about to lose their ride to school.

The State Center Community College District opted to no longer fund a program that since 2017 has provided free bus passes to Fresno-area community college students. The program has been paid for with money allocated for parking lot maintenance. A district spokesperson has said that money is now needed to fix campus parking lots.

But students and many elected leaders fear the move could leave hundreds of struggling college students — most of them people of color — with no way to get to class after the program ends in May.

“A lot of students are saying they’re going to drop out if the bus pass goes away,” said Deron Walker, president of the Associated Student Government at Fresno City College.

It’s unclear exactly when the decision to cut the program’s funding was made.

The move blindsided many of the district’s elected board of trustees, according to Board President John Leal, who also confirmed the issue never came up for a vote. Trustees only learned the program was ending when a Fresno City College student spoke up at a recent board meeting, he said.

“That was a bit of a surprise for me personally,” Leal told The Bee. “I would think when the district makes a decision that impacts the district like that, it would have risen to the level of importance for the board to have been informed.”

District authorities earlier this month applied for a Public Transportation Subsidy and Park & Rides Lots grant through the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District that they say would support the bus program.

Students also have mounted a grassroots campaign to keep the program going and Fresno City Councilmembers are working on a deal they say could help.

But whether those efforts will save the program remains unclear, and most of the district’s elected leaders are silent on the subject.

Finding the money

On Tuesday, the Associated Student Government at Fresno City College will vote to ask students to pay a fee to help fund the bus passes. If the resolution passes, college students would vote on whether to pay up to \$10 a semester.

Walker said the program is about more than simply getting students to class.

“It’s a solution for climate change and not only that, it benefits students in other ways,” he said.

Exactly how much money a student fee would generate remains unclear.

Ash Pallares, a Fresno City College student, has been collecting signatures around campus for a petition to save the program. The Sustainable Action Club also has been helping spread awareness and collect signatures, he said.

City leaders also have shown a willingness to help. Trustee Eric Payne said he felt hopeful after meeting with Fresno Mayor Lee Brand and other city officials about forming a partnership.

“I think we kicked the can down the road long enough and we need to come up with real solutions for our students in consultation with our community partners,” Payne said.

College district trustee Annalisa Perea also said she was hopeful for a solution and praised the efforts by the City Council and student government to save the program.

Fresno Councilmember Esmeralda Soria said she is bringing a resolution to the council that would help establish a formal funding partnership between the city and the district.

"I think that at the end of the day we should be looking at these (as) investments," Soria told The Bee. "They're about people and real students in our community college system that are trying to improve their lives. We all benefit at the end of the day from a more educated community."

College district officials haven't said — or responded to questions about — how much money they're seeking or when they expect to hear back from the air district. And at least three trustees said they don't yet know how much funding the district is seeking.

SCCCD Public Information Officer Lucy Ruiz did not answer questions about the money the district is seeking or whether it would be enough to keep the program alive.

In an email to The Bee, Chancellor Paul Parnell said district officials would provide that information once the board has received a report, but provided no timetable for when that might happen.

Where do elected board members stand?

While a string of community leaders have been vocal about efforts to save the program, only three of the college district's elected leaders — Leal, Payne and Perea — have answered questions about those efforts.

Four other trustees — Deborah Ikeda, Richard Caglia, Magdalena Gomez and Bobby Kahn — either didn't answer questions or directed inquiries to Ruiz, the district's spokesperson.

Those board members could be taking direction from the administration. A Feb. 21 email to trustees from the chancellor's office advised board members not to answer questions.

The email says: "Recently there have been inquiries to trustees and staff members regarding the student FAX bus challenge and the FCC basketball program. As a reminder, the following is an example of an appropriate board member response: "I would recommend you contact Lucy Ruiz, our Executive Director of Public and Legislative Relations, at the District Office. She can give you the best update."

Ruiz acknowledged the decision to have elected officials avoid questions was part of a strategy coordinated by district leadership.

"It is our policy to make sure our Board members have information before we disperse it to the media," Ruiz told The Bee in an email. "The Board does not have all of the details."

Parnell told The Bee while trustees "certainly have the freedom to respond to media questions, they are committed to working as a collective unit in conjunction with administration, staff, students and the communities they serve."

Parnell did not say why administrators and staffers did not inform trustees of the decision to end the program.

Payne, Perea and Leal said they believe elected officials should be open with the public.

Payne said trustees should be accountable to the people who elected them.

"Our constituents expect to hear from us," Payne said, "and we should be responsive to their needs and to their concerns because I want the folks that elected me in Trustee Area 2 to know that I'm working hard on their behalf."

Leal said the public "deserves" to hear from their elected officials.

"The administration needs to trust me as board president or as an individual trustee with my own thoughts and level of concerns and questions," he said. "I am holding the chancellor accountable and I am expecting we will get a full report on the sustainability of this program."