

Trustees Vow To Make Transportation Center Viable

Written by Barney Blakeney, Charleston Chronicle
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A 2011 S.C. Legislative Audit Council report suggested the James E. Clyburn University Transportation Center at S.C. State University for about 14 years has been a slush fund for university employees. Until recently no construction, research or programs were underway despite some \$24 million having been spent. That slush fund apparently continues. Eleven employees are being paid as center employees though still no research or programs are being conducted.

After receiving some \$50 million in federal funds, construction of the complex that would include six structures and transportation research programs only began in 2010.

In question has been the spending of some \$24 million. Since the funding became available in 2001 no construction had taken place. State legislators in 2010 asked the S.C. Legislative Audit Council to determine how the money had been spent. Construction of the first building in the complex began later that year.

The 2011 LAC report was a searing indictment of mismanagement and lax supervision of the project in regard to expenditures and suggested that the center's funding in essence became a slush fund for employees.

Construction of the first building, housing the complex's heating and air conditioning facility and transportation research garage, was completed in December 2011.

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Maurice Washington is chairman of a newly-formed SCSU Board of Trustees subcommittee to oversee implementation and further development of the center. He said essentially the 11 people who have been hired as center employees are being paid to do nothing because the new \$4.8 million building is vacant.

However the board of trustees and its subcommittee are committed to insuring the center complies with state and federal policies regarding the spending of taxpayer dollars, he said.

Washington said SCSU staff has been directed to provide job descriptions and salaries for the 11 people already being paid as center employees. That information should be available by the end of the month, he said.

But the center lost its federal designation as a transportation center in 2006 and is ineligible to receive further federal funding to complete the estimated \$107 million complex. SCSU trustees recently tentatively approved taking \$1.6 million from the institution's operating budget to fund further construction in the project.

Acting trustee board chairman John Corbitt said the project is a good one that he hopes will be completed. SCSU needs about \$85 million to complete the Clyburn center project. But the plan to fund it is being opposed.

Former SCSU trustee board chairman Maurice Washington cast the only dissenting vote among the nine members voting to give tentative approval to the diversion of funds.

The institution will carry a \$6.4 million deficit into its upcoming annual budget. It can ill afford diverting money to a construction project, he said.

Washington said the board of trustees should have provided more oversight of the quagmire that has become the transportation center development. The board relied on previous administrators' oversight despite seeing no construction for more than a decade after the

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center's proposal.

"We learned a valuable lesson and are now more engaged and focused going forward. We haven't given up on the concept of making the transportation center viable and useful to the citizens of the state. It will require hard work, but the center will be made to do what it was designed to do," Washington said.