

McGill DFUs create deficit

The ability for students to easily opt out of certain dedicated fee units using online forms has caused a stir for many student groups and organizations

KELLY EBBELS
The McGill Daily

MONTREAL (CUP)—Students at McGill University were given an online option to opt out of some fee payments this summer. Now the Students' Society of McGill University (SSMU) is warning some clubs and societies to prepare for drastic budget cuts.

For a two-week period at the beginning of each academic term, students who want to opt out of SSMU service levies or the independent fee levies for McGill's chapter of Quebec Public Interest Research Group (QPIRG) can now do so online. The previous system forced students to submit their requests in writing.

In a letter to the affected student groups, McGill Deputy Provost Morton Mendelson described the move to online opt-outs as a step toward "greater transparency and more timely service."

But student group and SSMU representatives fear that their operating budgets—and their autonomy—are in jeopardy with the new arrangement.

"It actually puts us in danger. We now have no security over our funding," said QPIRG-McGill's internal coordinator, Leila Pourtavaf.

SSMU President Jake Itzkowitz and Vice-President (Finance and Operations) Imad Barake expressed concern about the process' simplicity. They requested that the opt-out window be shortened to five business days at the beginning of each semes-

ter, and that there be an extra pop-up window to provide as much information about each optional fee as possible.

Both requests were denied. Now SSMU is warning affected groups to expect a budget reduction of up to 40 per cent.

However, Mendelson defended the decision, saying that the manual process of opting out was "less legitimate." He also pointed out that the University retained the authority to regulate the opt-out process.

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LEILA POURTAVAF
INTERNAL COORDINATOR
QPIRG-MCGILL

"This ensures students the right to opt out in a convenient way," he said.

QPIRG, part of a national network of Public Interest Research Groups, conducts research on social justice and environmental issues. The organization's opt-out procedure is written into its constitutional by-laws and it has been processing opt-outs manually since its inception in 1988. QPIRG had planned to move the opt-out process to its website, along with an optional questionnaire, to make the process more accessible. However, it

argues that the new system infringes upon its autonomy.

"We believe [this move] is an attack on independent student groups," Pourtavaf said.

There are seven optional SSMU fees students pay each semester, including three new fees that passed last semester by referendums. Some McGill faculties also collect optional fees. Larger ancillary fees, such as the \$103 Athletics Fee and \$100 Information Technology Charge, are not optional.

If students were to opt out of every such possible fee—not including their Health and Dental Plan, which students can already opt out of online—they would save \$26.75 per semester.

QPIRG, Queer McGill, and Midnight Kitchen—the vegan food collective that passed an optional referendum fee of \$1.25 last semester—are among the groups affected. They held a meeting on 1 September with others affected by the opt-out process to discuss concerns and to formulate a plan.

However, no group's agreement with McGill specifically addresses the opt-out process, severely limiting their options.

Some students are also concerned about the lack of notice provided to the student organizations about the change. While QPIRG was negotiating its memorandum of agreement with McGill, which it signed only three months ago, the University said nothing about a plan to move all opt-out fees online.

Housing crunch hits Sask students hard

KSENIA PRINTS
CUP Central Bureau Chief

SASKATOON (CUP)—For students attending Saskatchewan's postsecondary institutions, returning to classes this fall could mean homelessness or doubled rent.

With a full residence system, a city-wide vacancy rate of 3 per cent in April, and overflowing homeless shelters, many students arriving at the University of Saskatchewan this fall are unable to find housing.

A huge tent city will be raised at the University of Saskatchewan's Bowl on 11 September to raise awareness of the housing crisis. As well, three of Saskatoon's postsecondary institutions—the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology Kelsey Campus, and Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies—have started free online boarding registries, allowing property owners to offer boarding opportunities to students.

The University of Saskatchewan's administration has waived user fees on the University's housing registry for two weeks. The Administration is also considering opening lounges for students and even renting out entire hotel floors.

"The level of support is heart warming," said James Pepler, President of the University of Saskatchewan Students' Union.

"It's fair; it's capitalism ... but there's just nothing left," he said.

Long-term solutions are also in the

works. The University of Saskatchewan has begun construction on several new residences, and the Saskatchewan government began consultations to address housing issues with community members in Saskatoon, Regina, and Prince Albert on 13 August. Since then, over \$11.7 million has been invested in 248 new and renovated affordable housing units throughout the province by all three levels of government.

The province suggested that Saskatoon place a temporary ban on converting low-rent apartments into more lucrative condominiums, but the proposal was shut down by city council in August.

Saskatchewan is only the most recent province to experience a housing shortage, signaling a growing national concern.

Cities like Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, and Vancouver have also faced a dire lack of affordable housing. According to a July Angus-Reid poll, 66 per cent of Canadians view the housing market as overpriced, with Canadians aged 18-34 complaining the most.

Regina is also examining options to increase housing opportunities, such as policies limiting apartment-to-condo conversion and increasing affordable housing projects. In Calgary, organizations like the Poverty Reduction Initiative have been pushing to legalize the rental of secondary suites such as basements and garages.

But in Pepler's eyes, any federal help that arrives could come too late.

"If one student doesn't have a home, then we've failed," he said.

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