

Lawsuit latest in saga of how Wright State lost first presidential debate

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Updated March 07, 2017 By Lynn Hulse, Staff Writer

Wright State University was supposed to host the first presidential debate in October, an event that could have put the university on the national map, brought in thousands of journalists, and possibly millions for the university and the region.

Just weeks before the debate was set to happen, it was cancelled. The combination of security risks and high costs caused WSU to pull out of the event. The debate was moved to Hofstra University in New York.

Now, a lawsuit has been filed by a consultant who accuses the university of "bafoonery" and is seeking \$1 million.

Read coverage of the lawsuit here

Here's a look at how this story developed:

April 1, 2015: WSU one of 16 sites considered for debate

Wright State University is one of 16 sites that has applied to host one of the 2016 general election presidential debates, according to the Commission on Presidential Debates.

"I think we have a very competitive package. The impact on the region will be significant," said John McCance, Wright State advisor to the president for presidential debate.

RELATED: What other sites were in the running?

Wright State University staff and faculty are showered with confetti and balloons during Staff Development Day, on Super Tuesday, as Debate 16 was launched for the first Presidential Debate in September on the campus.

TY GREENLEES / STAFF

Photo: Ty Greenlees

Sept. 23, 2015: Wright State chosen to host first presidential debate

The Commission on Presidential Debates announced Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2015, that Wright State's Nutter Center will host the first presidential debate on Sept. 26, 2016.

The announcement was awfully big news for Wright State as well. The school was chosen from a list of 16 applicants.

"We're extremely proud. We're honored we can bring this to Ohio, our region and certainly to Wright State," said David Hopkins, the university's president. "It's a big day at Wright State. It's a big day for our community."

The last time Ohio hosted a presidential debate was Oct. 28, 1980, in Cleveland when incumbent President Jimmy Carter faced off against former California Gov. Ronald Reagan, according to The American Presidency Project.

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Jan 22, 2016: Wright State adds millions to cost of presidential debate

Wright State University informed its Board of Trustees at a meeting that it plans to spend around \$8 million in preparation for the September presidential debate at the Nutter Center.

A few trustees expressed concern over the rising price tag; the trustees previously were told the figure would be in the ballpark of \$3 million to \$5 million.

The university says it needs more money to address increased cyber security concerns.

"It was \$3 million to \$5 million. Now it's \$8 million. Will it be \$10 million at the next meeting?" said trustee C.D. Moore.

RELATED: Trustees question how the university would cover the tab if sources fell short

May 14: WSU pleads for help in raising \$8M debate tab

Wright State University is under the gun to raise \$8 million, spruce up the 25-year-old Nutter Center and roll out the welcome mat to 5,000 journalists who are expected to cover first presidential debate in Dayton on Sept. 26.

"It's overwhelming right now but I got a good team working on it," WSU President David Hopkins said. "And we have lots of partners in the region."

But in the same conversation, Hopkins twice made a plea for fund-raising assistance, saying, "We're going to need everybody to step up and help us. We went out in good faith to bring this. We've been on it for two years. It is coming. We're going to have a chance to really show off, but we need help."

The plea comes as the university began informing some staff members that their positions will be eliminated as the school works to cut \$19 million from its budget in the next two years.

RELATED: University president says 'all hands on deck'

June 17: Top Wright State official gets \$60K extra for debate prep

A high-ranking Wright State University administrator is getting paid an extra \$60,000 on top of his six-figure salary to direct preparations for the presidential debate the university will host on Sept. 26.

In all, Vice President for Planning Robert J. Sweeney received three stipends in 2015. That brought his compensation to \$364,432 and made him the eighth highest paid employee at Wright State, which has raised tuition, cut staff and dipped into reserves because of a budget shortfall.

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July 19: Wright State pulls out of presidential debate

When Wright State University President David Hopkins found out that a \$1 million contribution wasn't coming through it was the final straw after months of lackluster fund-raising for the Sept. 26 presidential debate at the Nutter Center.

Hopkins on Tuesday announced that he had asked the Commission on Presidential Debates to release WSU from its obligation. He cited concerns over rising costs related to security and said the financially strapped university couldn't afford to fund the debate out of its reserves.

"It would be different if we had people stepping up and covering the costs," Hopkins said.

With just 10 weeks to go before the debate, he said WSU had raised about \$3 million to \$3.5 million in contributions and pledges, state funding, anticipated charge-backs and in-kind contributions.

Hopkins had estimated the cost to host the debate to be \$5 million to \$8 million, but said Tuesday the cost was projected to go up by a "couple million" because of security concerns. Bowing his head at a news conference, he said WSU simply could not afford to go forward with the debate.

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RELATED VIDEO: WSU debate cancellation stuns business owners hoping for financial boost

July 20: Some WSU students still get to attend first debate

Hofstra University has offered to allow 15 Wright State students to attend the first presidential debate at the Hempstead, N.Y., campus, which replaces WSU as host of the debate, according to Wright State President David Hopkins.

"What a very generous offer. I really, really appreciate that," Hopkins said a day after announcing that Wright State was withdrawing as host of the debate.

Hopkins said Wednesday that university donors will be asked to cover the costs for the students, who will be chosen by lottery.

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Aug 11: WSU to keep state money, despite losing debate

Wright State University still doesn't know how much of the \$2 million paid to the Commission on Presidential Debates will be refunded now that the university is no longer hosting the Sept. 26 debate, according to Seth Bauguess, WSU spokesman.

"At the conclusion of the 2016 debates the Commission on Presidential Debates has agreed to review its records and determine what amount, if any, of Wright State's financial contribution can be refunded," Bauguess said.

The money paid to the commission by each host university covers for the commission's costs to stage debates. There are three presidential and one vice presidential General Election debates this year.

Wright State spent \$2.5 million on the debate. Bauguess said officials are still finalizing cost figures as Wright State unwinds debate preparations and determines how much of the cost can be covered with nearly \$2 million in cash and pledges it received.

RELATED: 'No one who has given cash has asked for it back'