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Screening of porn film at University of Maryland canceled

Lawmakers threatened to cut school's funding if movie was shown

By Stephen Kiehl, Laura Smitherman and Gadi Dechter

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The University of Maryland, College Park, has canceled this weekend's screening of a hard-core pornographic film after state lawmakers objected and threatened to cut funding to the flagship state university.

UM President C.D. Mote Jr. decided to cancel the screening of *Pirates II: Stagnetti's Revenge*, which was to be shown at the student union and had been approved by a student programming committee. A behind-the-scenes negotiation between state Senate officials and the university ensued after a debate broke out this morning on the chamber's floor over the screening.

"That's really not what Maryland residents send their young students to college campus for, to view pornography," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller. He acknowledged the legislature shouldn't get involved in censoring movies but said the General Assembly is not going to support screening hard-core pornographic movies on a state campus paid for by taxpayer dollars.

Sen. Andrew P. Harris, a Republican from Baltimore and Harford counties, suggested amending the state's annual budget to deny any funding to a higher education institution that allows a public screening of a film marketed as a XXX-rated adult film, unless it is part of an official academic course.

Miller indicated he would vote for the budget amendment, giving substantial backing to the threat of denying the university tens of millions of dollars in state funding.

Senators debated the evils of pornography and the First Amendment for much of the morning, but Miller had to postpone discussions several times as groups of young school children entered the gallery on field trips to the State House. At one point, Miller tried to explain to students why senators kept changing the subject.

"If you kids are wondering what we're doing, we're waiting for you to leave the room," Miller said. "We're going to talk about some bad stuff."

As of Wednesday, the student union at Maryland had not received any complaints about the film, but many on campus seemed unaware it had been scheduled. The 138-minute film, billed as a "XXX blockbuster" by its distributor, Digital Playground, was the most expensive porn movie ever made, at \$10 million. It was released last September.

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The film was provided to the university for free, so no student fees or state money was used to bring it to campus. But some still questioned whether hard-core porn has a place on a college campus.

The chaplain of the Catholic Student Center, the Rev. Kyle Ingels, said pornographic films are "degrading to the human person," adding, "It really runs counter to our efforts to try to form people to be men and women who will go out and contribute to society."

The Baptist Collegiate Minister on campus, Jessica Schulte, also objected, saying in an e-mail to *The Baltimore Sun* today: "I personally don't believe that porn is 'appropriate' in any context, including the university, but it is legal and is protected by our right to free speech, so from that standpoint, the university is certainly 'allowed' to show it."

Adam Kissel, director of the Individual Rights Defense Program at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said the legislature was "far out of line" for threatening to withhold funding and said Mote's apparent "capitulation" was "distressing."

"I think because of the autonomy that a public university ought to have versus the legislature, the president should not have canceled the film," Kissel said, though he added it was not immediately clear whether the pornographic film would have constituted protected speech under the First Amendment.

Obscene content is not necessarily protected under the U.S. Constitution, Kissel said, but the fact that the student union planned to have Planned Parenthood give a pre-screening presentation on safe sex practices before the film strengthens the First Amendment argument. Planned Parenthood, while saying it does not endorse pornography, had accepted the invitation as a way to educate students.

"If there's something meant to be educational about it, then it's much better protected," Kissel said. In that case, the legislature's threat might be viewed as a violation of the university's First Amendment right, and Mote's cancellation as a violation of the student committee's rights, he said.

Four years ago, the university's student union showed *Deep Throat*, the classic 1972 porn film, said Lisa Cunningham, program coordinator for the union's Hoff Theater. She said she thought *Pirates II* would be a good alternative to drinking or other dangerous activities.

"We thought this would be something fun for the students to do, especially since we're getting close to the end of the semester," Cunningham said. "We're a college movie theater and we thought it would bring out the students."

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