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MONTANA KAIMIN

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ASUM to consider supporting a reopened Missoula Amtrak line

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MONTANA KAIMIN

ASUM will discuss a resolution tonight encouraging the Montana legislature to pass a bill funding the reopening of an Amtrak line through Missoula.

The route, which closed January 1979, would connect Missoula, Bozeman and Billings.

Scott Martin, the assistant for the director of ASUM's Office of Transportation, said the route would help the Missoula community so that "students who live in the southern part of Montana have other means of travel than bus and individual, single traveler vehicles."

Since Amtrak is federally funded, local governments need to reinvest in creating the necessary infrastructure to open this route, MontPIRG member Shayna Price said.

The Montana Senate bill that ASUM may decide to support would supply some of those funds by opening up the Montana coal bed trust fund to give loans to local governments.

"Local governments need to do some investment to show the federal government they're willing to put in a railway," Price said.

Martin said that the railway would not only benefit a large part of the student population but would also encourage students to use more energy-efficient means of travel.

"A lot of students don't have cars," Martin said. "And if they do, gas prices will probably go up."

On Monday, Price explained to ASUM senators the importance of supporting state and federal lawmakers in transportation issues, especially now that the Montana State Legislature is primed to discuss a number of transportation bills.

ASUM and MontPIRG are in a unique position, Price said, because Montana Senator Max Baucus is the main author of a future Congressional bill dealing with the issue of infrastructure and maintenance of roads.

Price explained that Baucus will ask that any new highway bill will focus more on investing in local communities "so they can figure out what they need."

Price also asked that ASUM consider joining the Transportation for America Campaign to show Baucus and other Montana lawmakers their support for transportation reform.

The campaign is a national coalition of local governments and public interest groups aimed at implementing nation-wide transportation reform.

"It's focusing on finding solutions for our transportation issues in America," Price said.

The main goal that Transportation for America is focusing on right now, Price said, is changing the way national and state governments deal with highways.

Coming at an opportune time, the bill discusses the pending economic stimulus package, Price said. She said that the Transportation for America Campaign is hopeful that the package will set aside money for more transportation reforms.

"By putting all our energy into building new roads, we're not focusing on the maintenance or infrastructure of roads," Price said.

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