

The Good 5¢ Cigar

Student Newspaper at the University of Rhode Island

In tough financial times, U.S. Sen. Whitehouse explores Congressional assistance to university

[Tyler Will](#)

Issue date: 3/27/08 Section: [News](#)

Media Credit: [Christopher Barrett](#)

U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse speaks with Dining Services worker Aaron Ames at Mainfare yesterday.



03/27/08 - During a visit to the University of Rhode Island yesterday, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) assessed possible federal assistance to the school and urged students to vote in the upcoming presidential election.

The solicitation of federal assistance comes during a tight financial situation exasperated by Gov. Donald Carcieri's proposed \$12 million cut from URI's budget as the state faces a roughly \$430 million deficit.

After touring the construction site of the new Center for Biotechnology and Life Sciences, eating in the recently opened Hope dining hall and meeting a host of administrators and student leaders, Whitehouse said he was impressed with URI and called it the state's "premier university."

During an interview with the Cigar editorial board, Whitehouse said he had high hopes that the rise of his Rhode Island Congressional peers - Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-District 1) and Sen. Jack Reed (D) - to their respective Appropriations committees could help steer more federal funding toward the university.

"I certainly am keenly interested in helping URI take advantage of those opportunities," Whitehouse said.

Specifically, the school is looking for additional funding sources to complete the new Pell Library and the Inner Space Center at the Graduate School of Oceanography campus in Narragansett.

President Carothers said Whitehouse had come at the request of Vice President of Administration Robert Weygand, who had asked Whitehouse to identify areas where he could be of support.

"We're always looking for help and earmarks for one project or another," Carothers said.

Federal earmarks could become increasingly important to the university as the state retreats from funding the school. But the university is just one of many state agencies facing budget cuts and increasingly tight financial situations.

Whitehouse blamed the state's fiscal crisis on Carciari and said the Republican governor should have seen the warning signs.

"What's sad is to see this happen six years into an administration's term that has had every opportunity to see it and every opportunity to prepare for it but has never developed the working relationship with the Legislature to get anything done," Whitehouse said.

The cuts eventually trickle down to students, who see less in the way of financial aid while tuition rises. Some students turn to federal, need-based Pell Grants for help. But the grants - with a maximum award of \$4,731 for the 2008-2009 award year - only cover a third or less of college costs.

Whitehouse said that raising the maximum Pell Grant award is important to Congressional Democrats.

"In the long run, I'd treat higher education as a national security issue," Whitehouse said. "If you look at the long-term structure of the country, the economic performance of the people, that's what everything else stands on."

Whitehouse said he wants "substantial increases" in Pell Grant awards and although the grant amounts have risen in the last few years, "there's been a lot of discussion about raising it even further," Whitehouse said. "We find more and more families having trouble affording college."

Whitehouse blamed the poorly funded Pell Grant program on friction with the Bush Administration during budget talks.

"It's polite to call them negotiations," Whitehouse said. "[The President] took almost no interest in the process."

And as Congress prepares next year's budget, Whitehouse said Bush has become a lame duck president.

"This year is going to be interesting, because when we get to the end of his term, it makes less sense to fight with him," Whitehouse said. "We'll be in a very different environment this year than we were last year."

Whitehouse hopes that environment includes Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) as president and has publicly endorsed her to occupy 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

While he said he likes both Clinton and Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), his preference is based partly on Clinton's experience fighting accusations of her husband's improprieties while he was president.

"I think either of them would be an excellent president," Whitehouse said. "[But Clinton is] more politically tested against the Republican smear machine."

Even if Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) is elected, Whitehouse said he expects to see some bipartisanship.

“There are a lot of issues where John McCain has worked with Democrats,” Whitehouse said. “He has given signals that a McCain White House will not be a haven for pure ideology.”

But what does concern Whitehouse is the federal debt, which he stands around \$9.2 trillion.

”It’s easy to get lost in the bigness of the number,” Whitehouse said. “It’s extremely dangerous for us to carry that number.”

Whitehouse attributed the deficit to the war in Iraq and Bush-supported tax cuts that critics charged only helped the country’s richest people. Other budget problems, Whitehouse said, are government entitlement programs and rising health care costs.

”That’s an even bigger problem than the nine trillion in debt we carry,” Whitehouse said.

For those reasons and others, Whitehouse urged students to take a break between studying and exams and pay attention to government.

”There are not going to be a lot of elections at the national level that have consequences like this one,” Whitehouse said. “Save a little time to pay attention to the U.S. government. This coming election is going to have extremely significant consequences.”

Editor-in-Chief Chris Barrett contributed to this report.