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Lawmaker criticizes UW-EC for \$2 charge for ID

By McLean Bennett

Leader-Telegram staff

A state lawmaker said UW-Eau Claire may be opening itself to possible lawsuits by charging students \$2 to buy voter ID cards.

Rep. Gary Hebl, D-Sun Prairie, said Tuesday he believes the \$2 charge may be an illegal poll tax — a contention university officials dispute.

"You cannot charge someone for the right to vote," Hebl said.

UW-Eau Claire has referred to the new cards as a "student voter photo ID," a description Hebl said makes the \$2 fee illegal. If the sole purpose of the ID is to let students vote, "and you have to pay for it, then that's a poll tax," he said.

UW-Eau Claire last week announced it is selling the new identification cards that comply with a new state law requiring people to show a photo ID before voting in elections. The university's regular student IDs, known as Blugold Cards, aren't eligible under the law because they lack some of the required information, prompting the university to create a new set of cards.

UW-Eau Claire spokesman Mike Rindo said only students who don't already have another valid ID — such as a Wisconsin driver's license, a U.S. military ID or a passport — are expected to get the new cards.

The new IDs cost about \$2 to make, Rindo said, noting the university estimates it would have cost more than \$22,000 to provide the cards for free to the school's 11,000-plus students.

"It simply recovers our cost" to produce the cards, Rindo said of the fee.

Rindo said the university checked with the UW System's legal counsel before deciding to charge for the cards.

Only one UW-Eau Claire student had complained about the fee as of Tuesday, Rindo said, adding the university had issued 11 of the cards by that afternoon.

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Reid Magney, a spokesman for the state Government Accountability Board, said state statutes don't prohibit universities from charging for voter IDs.

"There's no statute that says that they have to be free or that they have to be a certain price," he said.

UW-Stout in Menomonie announced earlier this month it was providing free voter ID cards to students who need them.

Voters must start showing an acceptable photo ID to vote during primary elections Feb. 21.

An unexpired ID card issued by a Wisconsin-accredited university or college is valid for voting, as long as it contains the card's issue date and the student's signature, according to the state Government Accountability Board. The card must expire within two years of being issued.

Wisconsin college students also must provide proof of enrollment along with their school-issued ID before voting.

Stacy Harbaugh, spokeswoman for the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin, said her organization hadn't filed a legal challenge against UW-Eau Claire's \$2 fee. However, the Wisconsin ACLU filed a federal lawsuit in December challenging the state's voter ID law, in part because ACLU members believe the law imposes an "unconstitutional poll tax."

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