Wright State Withdraws from Presidential Debate

Wright State President David Hopkins. File photo

Nutter Center

Flashback to the day Wright State University announced debate plans

By Lynn Hulsey
Staff Writer
FAIRBORN —
Wright State President David Hopkins announced Tuesday the university has withdrawn from hosting the first presidential debate in September.

- WSU cited rising costs and security costs
- Costs rose from $3.5 million to over $8 million
- University informed Commission on Presidential Debates at noon
- WSU in an internal remediation to overcome budget deficit

UPDATE @ 2:58 p.m.
The president of Wright State’s faculty union, Martin Kich, said cancelling the debate was probably for the best.
“[I]t’s unfortunate we’ve gotten two months away from it and we have to pull the plug on it. I don’t think that makes anyone look good. But if the alternative is we would be left with a sizeable financial liability because of this, then I think it’s the smart thing to do,” he said.
Kich said he felt the university was low-balling what the debate was actually going to cost.
“Under ideal circumstances, I think it would be a nice thing for the university to host this kind of an event, but given the financial issues the university is grappling with, from the start this seemed like a kind of dubious proposition.”

UPDATE @ 2:45 p.m.
In a release Tuesday, the Wright State Board of Trustees Chair Michael Bridges said the board fully supports Hopkins’ decision.
“It’s the responsible thing to do,” Bridges said in a release. “While the community has been overwhelmingly supportive of Wright State hosting the debate, the safety and security of the campus and community is of paramount importance.”
Unlike private universities that have hosted debates in the past, Wright State cannot restrict public access to its campus, which added to the security challenges, the university said.
“We were fully aware of the challenges and were prepared to meet them when we decided to host the debate, but things have changed,” Hopkins said. “The current national environment has made security even more critical.”
“It’s a shame that security concerns have gotten so expensive,” said Ohio Senator Keith Faber (R-Celina). “And made it so difficult for a public university to host something like that requiring new construction.” Faber said he understands the university’s decision.

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The Commission on Presidential Debates posted this announcement on its website:

“In light of Wright State University’s announcement of earlier today, the September 26, 2016 Presidential Debate will be held at Hofstra University in Hempstead, NY. The Commission very much appreciates Wright State’s efforts. Hofstra University served very successfully as a presidential debate site in 2012. On September 23, 2015, the Commission announced that Hofstra University had agreed to serve as an alternate site this debate cycle if needed. The Commission looks forward to working with Hofstra once again.”

$2 million in gifts and pledges will be utilized for student and debate related activities.

“We’re not going to shut down the educational institution,” Hopkins said. Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., was listed as the debate’s backup site.

State Representative Niraj Antani (R-Miamisburg) said: “I am very disappointed to hear that Wright State had to pull out of hosting the debate due to security costs. The threat of radical Islamic terrorism is affecting us right here in the Dayton area. A presidential debate is a demonstration of democracy and it shouldn’t be cost prohibitive because of security concerns.”
UPDATE @ 2:09 p.m.
Greene County Sheriff Gene Fischer said he had not spoken with anyone at Wright State University on Tuesday. He had sent some people from his office to Cleveland for the Republican National Convention to check out the security layout on Monday.
“I'm convinced we could have had enough manpower, where's the money coming from I wouldn't have any idea,” he said. “We would've been able to get the manpower, but fundraising is always an issue.”
Fischer said he didn’t remember exactly how many law enforcement personnel would have been needed to cover the event.
“With everything going on, every time something happens, the number has to get bigger because you never know what to anticipate,” he said

UPDATE @ 2:01 p.m.
“I really wanted this experience for our students,” Hopkins said in a news conference.
The escalating security concerns have caused the financial costs to rise too much, Hopkins said.
The university was expecting to pay about $3.5 million when planning first started, but now it’s exceeded $8 million, he said.
Hopkins said with the nature surrounding this presidential election, the costs were too high.
“We went into this in good faith,” Hopkins said.
UPDATE @ 1:53 p.m.
WSU President David Hopkins said Tuesday that Wright State is withdrawing as host of first presidential debate scheduled for Sept. 26 at Nutter Center. He cited escalating costs for security and the inability to raise enough money from community and state to cover what could be as much as $8 million to host the event.

Hopkins informed the Commission on Presidential Debates at noon today, and hopes to recoup at least some of the $2 million fee that was paid to the Commission in advance. Approximately $500,000 had been spent already on Nutter Center upgrades.
The university has raised about $3.5 million in contributions, state funding and in-kind pledges. The university is in an internal remediation plan to overcome its budget deficit, and that also played a role in the decision, Hopkins said. “I can’t dip into more reserves to do this debate,” Hopkins said. “I’m not going to do this when we’re in remediation.” Hopkins said his board of trustees has been supportive and understands the concerns about of spiraling costs and safety. “I wanted it so much for our students,” Hopkins said. “I hate this decision. It hurts my heart.”

**FIRST REPORT**

Wright State University will make a major announcement about the upcoming presidential debate. The university will host the first debate of this General Election on Sept. 26 in the Nutter Center. Wright State is one of four host universities chosen this year by the the commission, a non-profit in charge of producing the General Election debates. In addition to the presidential debates at Wright State and Washington University, Longwood University in Farmville, Va., will host the vice presidential candidates on Oct. 4 and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas will host the last of the presidential debates Oct. 19. The Dayton Daily News will have live updates at the 2 p.m. press conference. Follow reporter Kara Driscoll on Twitter.