

Penn State staff commute to save cash

by Melinda Skutnick

Due to a lack of jobs outside the State College region, many Penn State staff employees are forced to commute because living in the area is just not an option.

"I can't afford to," said Carol Root of Tyrone, an employee at Otto's Café, a campus coffee shop operated by Penn State Food Services. "[With] three kids, there's no way."

Root pays \$240 per month in transportation costs because there are no comparable jobs in her area. Root estimates that her living costs are \$300 less per month than they would be in State College.

As of 2005, the average salary of Penn State housing and foods staff – this does not include administrators—was \$29,318 among 473 full-time employees, according to Penn State's Fact Book. The average salaries among clerical and secretarial staff at Penn State, however, vary by department and college.

In Penn State's College of the Liberal Arts, the average salary in 2005 for a staff assistant was \$28,685. Staff assistant Lynn Setzler said she spends \$40 per week in gasoline alone to commute to campus. This



Photo by Melinda Skutnick
Otto's Cafe employee Carol Root is one of many Penn State staff who commute to work.

amounts to more than \$2,000 of her annual income allotted for transportation to work, not factoring in parking costs.

But for Setzler it's not a matter of hous-

ing costs; it's a lifestyle choice.

"There's no way I'd live here," said Setzler about State College. "It's too hectic. Too much hustle and bustle."

Setzler, who travels from Lewistown, added that there are "no large offices" in her area so she must drive 45 minutes to work at Penn State, regardless of weather conditions.

"There's always the threat of the mountain closing," said Setzler, referring to frequent winter road closings on the mountains surrounding State College.

Sharon Miller, a PSU Food Services employee at Chick-fil-A in the HUB-Robeson Center, agreed.

"The drive is just horrible. [Penn State] doesn't care if the mountain's closed," said Miller, from Osceola Mills. As an "essential employee," Miller is required to travel to Penn State despite sleet, snow and other weather hazards.

"I just call and say, 'Look, I'm not coming 'til daylight,'" added Miller, who begins work at 7 a.m. She said that the commute, however, is worth the trouble to get the medical, dental and retirement benefits she receives as a Penn State employee.

"The benefits cover a lot of medical prob-

lems of my family that my other insurance won't," said Sherri Butts, a Food Services employee at Nathan's in the HUB-Robeson Center.

Butts commutes 50 minutes from Penn's Valley with her mother and spends an average of \$80 a week just for gasoline. Butts wrecked her car on the way home from work Feb. 1. She said it will cost her \$4,000 to repair.

"The only way we don't come [to work] is if the whole campus is shut down," said Butts. She is an essential employee who was required to work on Feb. 14 despite the storm that hit central Pennsylvania that week.

Peggy Ryder, a staff assistant in the engineering department, travels from Allport, just outside Philipsburg, each day with 13 others in a PSU van that costs them each \$61 per month. This alleviates some of the transportation costs associated with the long drive.

Ryder, who came to Penn State after her previous employer shut down, said she stays with the university for the health and

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Costly student rentals create empty pockets

by Jessica Williams

With soaring tuition costs and few affordable housing options in State College, working-class Penn State students have a hard time making ends meet.

The College Cost Calculator, accessible online from the Penn State Web site, estimates that students will spend \$10,479 per semester in various costs, not including "additional miscellaneous costs, such as transportation, laundry, clothing, dining out, utilities, and medical, dental, personal, and recreational expenses." This figure applies to an in-state sophomore student with an undeclared major living off campus. Students can use the data to determine the average cost for a Penn State semester, including tuition, room and board, meals, books and supplies.

While some students may get jobs to offset those "additional miscellaneous costs," others are responsible for the whole bill.

"To a lot of students, these numbers affect

them minimally—these are the students who have parents or other outside sources putting them through school, footing the bill for tuition and rent. I don't have that luxury," said Rebecca Pickett, a sophomore.

The College Cost Calculator is based on the 2006-2007 academic year. The official

tuition rates for fall 2007 will not be released until the Penn State Board of Trustees meets in July. At Penn State, the most expensive public university in the country, students will face a predicted yearly tuition of approximately \$13,000, 60 percent higher than 10 years ago when tuition was \$5,434, according to figures on Penn State's Web site. "Even though tuition has

gotten so high, it sometimes seems like the least of my worries," said Pickett, a student dependent on extra shifts at work and left behind by friends with higher expendable incomes.

"For example, I chose to stay in the dorms this year because of the problem of

"Tuition wasn't a concern for me. After completing my B.S. degree, my parents informed me that I was on my own financially if I wanted to attend graduate school. I chose to go to Penn State because I knew I had an assistantship that would cover my tuition and pay me a monthly stipend," said Deanna Nevling, a graduate student living at Vairo Village Apartments, about a 10-minute drive from campus. "The cost that forces me to have a serving job is rent. I pay almost \$600 a month," she added.

Penn State announced that the fall semester of 2007 will likely see the second largest freshman class in its history, second only to this past year's class of 8,000 students. With many of these 8,000 students possibly seeking off-campus housing next year, the number of vacancies might decrease, said Pickett.

"My friend had difficulty last year finding

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--Deanna Nevling

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finding inexpensive, reliable housing off campus," said Pickett.

The Penn State Office of Student Aid reports that 82 percent of all Penn State students received some form of student aid during the most recently completed academic year (2005-06). Unfortunately, this help may not be enough after the tuition bill is paid.

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retirement benefits as well. But these benefits don't always make for a more enjoyable commute.

"When snow hits, people are afraid to drive...and a normal 45-minute [commute] turns into three hours," said Ryder. Her van pool also encounters bumper-to-bumper traffic coming into State College through Port Matilda, which she trusts will improve when I-99 opens, she said.

Another staff assistant in the engineering department, Jamie Whitehead of Philipsburg, commutes alone each day for the benefit of her children.

"I'm here for the kids' tuition," said Whitehead, who mentioned that she will pay 25 percent of standard tuition for her two children because she works for PSU.

Traveling from Altoona each day, Diana Wagner, also a staff assistant, rides with a co-worker to reduce costs.

"There's better pay and better benefits," said Wagner, comparing her current job to previous ones she has held closer to home. The drive, however, is not as appealing.

"There's no hard-and-fast rule for coming to work. I play it by ear," said Wagner. In the winter, the trip from Altoona to State

"Being a homeowner in this area is most difficult... because of the property taxes."

--Linda Matason

College is scary and dangerous, said Wagner, noting that at least one fatal accident occurs between Port Matilda and Bald Eagle each month.

Living closer to State College, however, still has its downside.

"It's cheaper to live [where I do]," said Kathy Yakich, an employee at Penn State's Otto's Café from Julian. She said she pays \$600 less in property taxes than her boss who lives in State College.

"Being a homeowner in this area as a staff member is most difficult because of the property taxes," said staff assistant Linda Matason of Boalsburg. "I read...that the State College school board has asked...to raise our property taxes by another 9 percent. Where does this end? Not all people living in this area are wealthy."

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realistic housing. I can't imagine how much harder it will be with the higher enrollment," she said.

With the obvious demand, the monthly prices of student housing remain much higher than the value of these apartments, especially downtown, said Nevling.

"I don't think housing is very affordable in this area. Also, living alone and renting in State College is very difficult. Most places are geared towards two to five people living in the same apartment," she said.

Cody Peters, a 27-year-old senior who has been working his way through school since 1998, lives in a house across Westerly Parkway, about a 20-minute walk to the edge of campus.

"I would like to live about three blocks from the downtown area," said Peters, "but I am all too aware of how much more it would cost me to find a nice, affordable place that close to campus."

Unlike Pickett, Peters does not see living on campus as an option.

"First of all, I'm not comfortable being 27 and living in the dorms," he said. "Also, with my job, I need to be able to park close to where I live."

Employed at a downtown bar, Peters said he is not thrilled with the idea of parking his car in a lot far away from his housing at 3 a.m. when he gets off work.

The term "affordable housing" floats in and out of daily conversations among concerned citizens, but rarely concerns students, said Peters.

"With affordable housing being such a hot-button topic, many people are complaining, saying the only affordable housing in State College is for students," said Peters. "I understand where they are coming from, but I pay \$575 per month in rent, and I have a long walking commute daily—don't even get me started on the tuition increase on top

of it."

Peters, who has been working full time since he began college, admits to feeling a certain degree of cynicism toward the housing market in State College.

"It is genius capitalism on the part of the realtors and those renting houses. There is high enough demand for housing, and many of the incoming students come from families that can afford housing and supply a safety net. The high prices set due to this make it even harder for those without a safety net and paying for expenses independently," said Peters.

The university makes an effort to assist students with the hunt for affordable living, holding an annual housing fair in the HUB at the end of January. They hosted nearly 30 vendors with special offers for the 2007-2008 school year, but it's possible the event is missing its primary target.

"I would never go to one of those things," said Pickett. "I bet it's probably geared towards the parents who pay their students' rent—you know, their son or daughter will take the pamphlets home to them, and they'll choose that way."

Alternatives for students seeking practical and cheap housing exist through Web sites such as ApartmentRatings.com. This site allows its users to specify their housing needs for potential landlords who will search the database and e-mail special offers and discounts to compatible renters. Similar sites exist for finding compatible roommates.

Peters offers his own possible solution. "While I unfortunately believe there is no chance of having the prices dropped to become easily affordable for some students, an approach would be to have a program or assistance set up to supplement costs that some students can't afford. The university could have off-campus subsidized housing for eligible students, much like work force housing for the real world," he said.

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Prosecuting innocent student riles PSU faculty

by Suzan Erem

Penn State's internal prosecution of a student found not guilty in court has caused the union that houses its archives at the university and some faculty members to rebuke the move.

Olivia Guevara, a graduate student in Labor Studies, was found not guilty of criminal mischief and tampering with property charges brought against her by Penn State after she and a group of students were caught writing chalk messages on Old Main encouraging the university to support the Designated Suppliers Program. Students have spent more than a year pressuring the university to sign onto the program, which is designed to ensure that Penn State's lion logo gear be made under safe and healthy working conditions by workers who have the right to associate freely.

"As a judge, this is the first time in my four years that I've seen a criminal charge for chalking," said Magisterial District Judge Jonathan Grine, who dismissed the charges. Grine noted that Penn State's videotape evidence showed Guevara chalking a pillar, not the door the university claims she damaged. After questioning the university attorney, Grine agreed that Penn State had been selective in its prosecution of this case.

"This is an issue of freedom of speech," he said during the trial.

The university not only stood by its position after losing the trial, but then charged Guevara through its internal procedures and found her guilty.

"I've come to trust the university police and Judicial Affairs," said PSU spokesperson Bill Mahon on WPSU after the trial. "They're really smart people who know what they're doing."

Despite Judge Grine's dismissal of all charges, Penn State Judicial Affairs censured Guevara for seven years and charged her \$400 for the damage.

Outraged by Penn State's continued prosecution of Guevara, United Steelworkers President Leo Gerard wrote to Penn State President Graham Spanier demanding the university drop the sanctions against her. The letter also calls for Spanier to meet with the students involved, a request they have made repeatedly.

"Sadly, the Steelworkers are all too familiar with the intimidation and perversion of the legal system used to thwart activities that would help the working people of the world," Gerard wrote in the letter to

Spanier. "Ms. Guevara and her fellow students are attempting to ensure that the workers who supply apparel for Penn State (apparel that no doubt generates significant revenue for the University) enjoy humane working conditions and are afforded basic human rights."

Penn State houses the official archives and oral history of the United Steelworkers, Gerard reminded Spanier in the letter, and union leaders such as Rich Trumka, current secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, have been trained by Penn State faculty.

In a rare move, almost 50 faculty members signed onto a letter to Spanier requesting he drop the prosecution and proposing the administration meet with students to discuss the Designated Suppliers Program. Four faculty members delivered the letter to Old Main and the next day received a letter from Spanier denying their requests.

"To commit to [DSP] under its present format is to put Penn State at legal risk," Spanier wrote, adding that, "Penn State has a long and deeply felt commitment to try to do the right thing with regard to apparel manufacturing."

Activists disagree.

"It took the university five years to adopt the [Worker Rights Consortium], which they're now claiming is a great thing," Guevara said. "I'm afraid it's going to take another five years to adopt the DSP." She agreed that Penn State sends a representative to DSP meetings, but added: "The only way they can have a say and address their issues with the DSP is by signing on."

United Students Against Sweatshops members have declared that they will escalate their activities until Spanier meets with them.

Penn State contracts with Nike to provide all Penn State logo apparel. The university receives a royalty, or percentage, on all garments sold with its logo, and Nike gets the sole concession for those garments, explained Theresa Haas, Penn State alumna and outreach associate for the Worker Rights Consortium.

Other universities that have resisted joining the DSP have raised the fear of facing anti-trust litigation, she said.

"This program does not put us or any institution at risk of facing anti-trust litigation," Haas said. The WRC relies on the legal advice of Donald Baker, former head of the anti-trust division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Haas said university officials often raise concerns over the impact of increased



Photo by Doug Bauman

Graduate student Olivia Guevara, an outspoken activist against sweatshop labor, is shown here in front of Old Main. Charges filed against her for "chalking" the door of the building were dismissed by a local judge, yet Penn State has censured and fined Guevara through internal procedures.

wages on retail prices, yet doubling the wages of workers in Mexico who make a shirt that retails for \$32 would increase the price of that shirt by only 50 cents, accord-

ing to the study by researchers at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

For more information, go to www.workersrights.org.

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