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# WKU board approves shared transportation contract with city

MICHAEL J. COLLINS Michael.Collins@bgdailynews.com

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Western Kentucky University's Board of Regents approved two new contracts last week, including one that will merge WKU transportation with the city of Bowling Green's.

The transportation contract approved unanimously at the quarterly meeting Friday will add an addendum to the already existing contract between the city and contractor RATP Dev.

The city previously used non-profit Community Action of Southern Kentucky for transportation services from 2003 to 2023. RATP Dev oversaw management duties from 2020 until the contract ended in June.

RATP Dev was awarded the full contract this year and now oversees all transportation services across the city.

Assistant Vice President of Business Services Jennifer Tougas said the contract is expected to lower costs by sharing city and university resources while providing better access to students and city residents.

“The agenda before you this morning is a small step towards a much larger vision of working collaboratively with the city to reimagine what public transit can be within Bowling Green, serving both WKU’s needs, serving student’s needs and the needs of the community,” Tougas told the board before the vote.

Tougas said the university's previous transport service, Topper Transit, provided 380,000 passenger trips during the 2023 fiscal year.

The contract will cost the university just over \$1 million for the first year, which Tougas said saves the university around \$80,000 compared to the current system.

Tougas said bus routes will remain the same during the first year and current bus drivers who qualify will be asked to return under the new operation.

ADA transportation will be handled by the city and billed to the university. The university will maintain ownership of its equipment and facilities while RATP Dev covers insurance liability.

The changes will go into effect on Oct. 1.

The board also approved a new 10-year banking contract that will consolidate university accounts under J.P. Morgan Chase Bank.

Currently, the university primarily utilizes Truist Bank and splits other services between J.P. Morgan Chase, PNC, and U.S. Bank.

Executive Vice President for Strategy, Operations and Finance Susan Howarth said the university will receive a \$75,000 signing bonus. The university will pay \$33,000 in fees

per year, which Howarth said was the lowest amount offered by a bank during the decision process.

The contract also allows athletic programs to handle “per diem” funds virtually rather than requiring coaches to carry large sums of cash. It also allows the university to deposit checks virtually rather than delivering them to the bank by hand.

The bank will also provide in-house investing services, eliminating the need for the university to find an outside institution for those services, Howarth said.

Howarth said the transition will begin in October and plans to be finished around May 2024.

The board went on to approve changes to WKU’s photojournalism program, adding a path for professional photographers and removing its photojournalism minor.

James Kenney, coordinator for the program, said change expands the department’s reach to better include non-journalistic photographers. The

change is part of a restructuring of the program that Kenney said helps better secure its future endeavors.

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“There were a lot of students out there that didn’t necessarily want to go into journalism as a career, but were very interested in the visual aspects of storytelling,” Kenney said.

The photojournalism minor was removed to ensure the photojournalism and photography major has enough resources to operate effectively. In recent years, Kenney said the program has focused on providing education in different areas of visual storytelling, including documentary and film making.

The program "is a very different kind of entity, but it makes sense to us that we keep our programs streamlined and not have too many things going on at one time," Kenney said.

The board also approved a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages certification, the first such certificate offered in Kentucky.

The university will phase out its TESOL minor in favor of the certificate within the next few years. English Department head and professor Alison Langdon said employers are better able to recognize the new certificate when reviewing applicants.

With about 20,000 ESL job openings available at any given time, both within the U.S. and abroad, Langdon said demand for TESOL services is only growing.

Langdon said the certificate is a standalone degree, allowing individuals not enrolled in a major program to be certified.

The board also approved an updated editorial integrity policy for the university's public broadcasting affiliates.

David Brinkley, staff regent and executive director of WKU Public Media, pointed to a lawsuit filed against Murray State University this year as evidence that a strong policy is needed.

The lawsuit filed in March accused officials of covering up attempts to interfere with reporting at its National Public Radio-affiliated station, WKMS.

Brinkley also pointed to a journalist from West Virginia Public Broadcasting who was allegedly

removed after pressure from Gov. Jim Justice's administration. The reporter had been covering alleged abuse within state-run disabilities programs.

Brinkley emphasized he's never felt pressured at WKU but the update helps codify policy to ensure future administrations abide by the same expectations.

When asked about the updated policy, WKU President Tim Caboni said he's proud to see the board's support and commitment through the adoption of the policy.

"As president, what I want everyone to understand is that (WKU Public Media) has complete autonomy — to ask any questions it wants to ask, to pursue any stories it wishes to pursue — without any interference or intervention from the institution, its leadership, or its PR program," Caboni said.

The board also approved several other matters, including:



- Approving undergraduate certificates in Strategies for Trauma Informed Approaches to Improving Resilience and Professional and Technical Writing.
- Approving a raise and extension for WKU's Head Women's Soccer Coach, Jason Neidell, who enters his 23 year and is the second longest tenured coach. Neidell's annual base salary increased from \$63,588 to \$85,000.
- Approving the philanthropic naming of a portion of WKU Softball-Soccer Indoor Facility to the Wendell and Jan Strode Locker Room.

The regents will meet next on Oct. 20 for a committee meeting, and again on Dec. 7 for their final quarterly meeting of the year.

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**Michael Collins**

Reporter

