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STATEMENT

by Dean of Students Mary Rouse

on safe nighttime transportation

April 2, 1992

This past week I have received a great deal of mail regarding the future of the Women's Transit Authority as a university-affiliated group. Much of this correspondence is the result of both a WTA mail campaign and stories in the media which have centered around the work of a committee I appointed in January to study campus nighttime transportation.

In understanding the issue, one thing must be clear: UW-Madison will continue its strong commitment to offering safe transportation for women as a practical way to help reduce sexual assault and violence.

The commitment is firm, but the mechanism must change. Through discussions with university officials, WTA members and students, it has become apparent that we must revise the current system.

I appointed The Nighttime Transportation Committee to help me study this complex situation. The report I am expecting from them next week will offer some guidance on how the university can proceed.

Two facts emerge: The university cannot legally continue to financially support WTA because it is no longer primarily serving the university, and because it offers its services and many of its volunteer opportunities only to women — therefore discriminating against those men who also would like to have a safe form of nighttime transportation available and for those men who would like to volunteer as drivers.

Recognizing that women historically have had particular difficulty obtaining safe nighttime transportation, the WTA — originally a student organization — with the full support of the campus, has provided hundreds of thousands of rides to women throughout the city since 1973. Most of those rides, with the exception of back-up cab service provided under contract by the Union Cab Company, have been provided by

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women volunteers under the coordination of women employees.

Last May, WTA asked us to consolidate their funding sources. They are supported by the University Department of Parking and Transportation and segregated fee dollars, City of Madison funds and private donations. As we looked into responding to their request, the evolution of WTA from a student organization to a community group became apparent and was further confirmed after a review of their ridership statistics. In fact, only 20-30 percent of their riders are students. Over time, they have become a community organization, and their use of our university fleet vehicles is not legal because they no longer are registered student organization. Practically speaking, this means that our insurance contracts will not cover them in the event of an accident or injury.

Recently, questions about why WTA does not allow men to volunteer as dispatchers and drivers or does not allow men to have free, safe rides home have surfaced. While the university understands the reasons WTA supporters have given for this practice, our university attorneys have advised us that we cannot provide a transportation service that prohibits men from using the service or participating in providing it. Therefore, as a result, we cannot continue to allocate university funds to WTA, given its current structure.

It is possible, and highly desirable, that the university continue to offer a door-to-door ride service which offers safe nighttime transportation for all. But that service must be one that serves the university community and one that meets legal standards.

The university cannot ignore the rules, policies and laws of the state no matter how just the cause. We must take this information into account, engage in problem-solving and see what we can do to make changes within the framework of the 1990s.

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