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McGreevey Backs Rutgers on Pro-Palestine Seminar

By MARIA NEWMAN

Gov. James E. McGreevey of New Jersey declined yesterday to step in to prevent a student group from holding a pro-Palestine conference at Rutgers University in October, even though some Jewish leaders and others say the group promotes anti-Semitic views.

Mr. McGreevey met with the president of Rutgers, Richard L. McCormick, yesterday to respond to growing criticism that the National Student Conference of the Palestine Solidarity Movement was being organized by students with ties to terrorists.

But even before his meeting with Dr. McCormick, the governor had been assured by the state's Office of Counterterrorism that it had no evidence that the student group sponsoring the forum, New Jersey Solidarity, had ties to such groups, said Kathleen Ellis, the governor's director of communications.

Ms. Ellis said that while the governor did not agree with the views espoused by the group, he had decided not to try to overturn the university president's decision to allow the conference.

"The fact of the matter is," Ms. Ellis said, "though he personally has very strong negative feelings about this group's message, it does come down to this is America and we all have a right to express our views as long as it's not a threat to anyone's safety. No one gets to pick and choose who gets to speak, who gets the stage."

In a statement issued after the meeting, Dr. McCormick said he and the governor had had a "friendly and productive conversation" in which they dwelled on the importance of free speech.

"The governor and I agreed that we find the views of New Jersey Solidarity to be reprehensible," he said. "But we also agreed that the best way to counter deplorable arguments is more discussion, not less, and that the appropriate place for this kind of discourse is the university. Governor McGreevey and I share the belief that the strength of our society depends on such openness."

When the university approved the conference last week, critics said Rutgers should not be condoning the activities of a group that is dedicated to the destruction of Israel.

In its Web site, the group, which officially calls itself New Jersey Solidarity -- Activists for the Liberation of Palestine, describes itself as a "grass-roots organization dedicated to resistance and action in support of the Palestinian struggle for justice, national liberation, human rights and self-determination." It goes on to say that it is dedicated to building coalitions and educating the

public "against racism and all forms of oppression," and calls for an immediate end to all United States political, military and economic aid to Israel.

"We unconditionally support Palestinians' human right to resist occupation and oppression by any means necessary," it goes on to say.

Those kinds of messages worry supporters of Israel.

Last week, a co-president of the State Senate, John O. Bennett of Monmouth County, called the conference "abominable" and asked the governor to force the university to cancel it.

The New Jersey Anti-Defamation League also condemned the group's message.

"Our complaints against them have nothing to do with their criticism of Israeli policy and everything to do with their agenda of the destruction of the state of Israel," said Shai Goldstein, regional director of the New Jersey group. "They believe the state of Israel should be destroyed by any means necessary."

At Rutgers, a representative for Hillel, an organization for Jewish college students, said he was not surprised that the conference was being allowed to continue.

"It was not Hillel's position that the conference be canceled," said Andrew Getraer, the group's executive director. "Our concern about the conference is that organizers have expressed such extremist views in support of suicide bombs and against the right of Israel to exist that our campus is going to be flooded with this type of extremist propaganda, and that people outside the campus community with similar views are going to be attracted here and they may act irresponsibly."

But he said he was confident that the university and state officials would monitor the situation and provide the necessary security.

No one from New Jersey Solidarity responded to requests for comments, but on its Web site, the group posted several responses to the criticism of the conference and attempts to get the governor to step in.

"As a student organization, we are entitled to the same rights as all other student organizations, rights recognized by the university," the group says.

In its long message, the group never addresses the accusation that it is affiliated with violent groups, but instead says it will continue to call for a free Palestinian state.

"We will continue to demonstrate, mobilize, organize and take action, and we look forward to the successful third North American conference to bring the numerous organizers throughout the continent together to strengthen our movement, strategize for the future, and build a sustainable movement linked to our sisters and brothers in Palestine."

