

Desert Sun.

NEWS

Group launches political ad against College of the Desert leaders, asks where is the money?



Jonathan Horwitz

Palm Springs Desert Sun

Published 7:26 p.m. PT Jan. 26, 2022

A group of Coachella Valley residents is ramping up its criticism of the College of the Desert's leadership for how the college has recently handled nearly \$1 billion financed in two bond measures passed by voters in 2004 and 2016.

The group, Promises Made- Promises Broken, is promoting a 30-second ad on social media that alleges COD leaders are operating in "deceit," and have "cancelled" plans for campuses in Indio, Cathedral City and Palm Springs.

Those claims do not align with public statements made by COD leadership.

The board of trustees approved a resolution at its meeting last Friday to affirm its commitment to bond projects, including an Indio campus and a west valley campus.

Superintendent/President Martha Garcia has said on multiple occasions that she is committed to building a campus in Palm Springs although she has not said at what scale.

On Wednesday, Board Chair Ruben Perez told the Desert Sun: "Campuses are not being canceled."

What's in the ad?

In the ad, cinematic music crescendos as a voiceover asks, "Where is the money?"

The music reaches a dramatic forte as hundreds of dollars are shown flushed down a toilet.

Finally, the voiceover returns to say, "Time for the leadership to resign."

Noticeably, the ad calls on Garcia and only three of the college's five trustees to resign: Perez, Aurora Wilson and Bea Gonzalez.

Those three trustees voted in a split 3-2 decision last July to appoint Garcia.

Trustees Fred Jandt and Bonnie Stefan opposed Garcia's appointment. They are not mentioned in the ad.

In December, Promises Made- Promises Broken sent mailers in English and Spanish to Coachella Valley voters that alleged COD had "abandoned," "stalled," or "cancelled" plans for campuses across the Coachella Valley.

Measure CC, passed in 2016, slated more than \$500 million for college expansion, repair and modernization projects, including construction of an Indio campus, a west valley campus and community sites across the valley.

Flyers circulated by the "Yes on CC" campaign in 2016 stated that Measure CC funds would be used to complete a west valley campus at the site of the old Palm Springs mall. The flyers said the campus would host programs focused on hospitality and culinary arts, film and media, architecture, health care and sustainable technology.

Such specifics are not in the official bond language and not legally binding, according to a bond lawyer who spoke at Friday's board meeting.

Where does COD say these projects stand?

Garcia assumed office in August. In October, she said the college would consider a new location for the proposed Roadrunner Motors project in Cathedral City, one such community site.

Garcia said the original budget for that project was \$20 million, and to continue construction at the site near the Cathedral City Auto Center would lead to an additional \$13 million in cost overruns.

Then-mayor of Cathedral City Raymond Gregory said Garcia announced her decision without alerting city officials.

Although the board of trustees can still decide to move forward with construction of Roadrunner Motors at the original Cathedral City site, the college is considering at least one site for the automotive school outside of Cathedral City.

Garcia also has raised questions about whether the college can move forward with plans for the \$350 million west valley campus in Palm Springs that would include a culinary institute and learning hotel with potential industry partnerships.

The lead industry consultant for the culinary institute and learning hotel was let go in December and told his job "has been eliminated."

In January, Garcia asked a bond lawyer to speak at Friday's board meeting to say whether such project components could be legally financed by bond money.

David G. Casnocha, a bond lawyer who worked with COD from 2003 to 2016 and said he had not previously been involved with Measure CC, said general obligation bond money must be used for educational purposes without "excessive private activity."

He questioned whether a culinary program and learning hotel with private development features fit that description, and said the answer could depend on the level of private activity associated with the COD facilities and programs.

Garcia also has concerns about the "feasibility" of building the Palm Springs campus as planned considering current enrollment and employment trends.

Feasibility data was previously collected in 2016 Garcia acknowledged last month after claiming that a feasibility study had never been done.

When voters approved Measure CC, COD was the second-fastest growing community college in California, and officials projected that it would soon be the fastest-growing in the state.

More than five years and a pandemic later, COD's enrollment is shrinking.

More: COD credited enrollment falls 16% since 2019; leaders present strategies to address decline

Where is the bond money?

Although the political ad shows money flushing down a toilet, that is surely not the case.

At its November meeting, the board held a study session on general obligation bonds led by Adam Bauer, CEO/President of Fieldman Rolapp & Associates, municipal advisor to the college district.

The session provided detailed financial information related to the college's bonds performance.

At that meeting, the board also acted on multiple resolutions related to the issuance and sale of bond funds.

In addition, the college district has a seven-member citizens bond oversight committee required by state law to ensure that bond money is spent on legal uses.

The committee is required by state law to ensure that general obligation bond funds are spent solely on land acquisition, construction and equipment and that no money goes to salaries or pay increases. The committee meets quarterly and produces an annual audit of bond expenditures.

According to a November presentation by MAAS, the firm contracted to manage the college's bond projects, COD has spent nearly \$470.7 million of bond funds to date, and nearly \$510.7 million remain budgeted.

The Promises Made- Promises Broken group says it has a teleconference meeting Tuesday, Feb. 1, to discuss its plans. Its website is accessible at this link: <https://promisesmadepromisesbroken.org>.

Jonathan Horwitz covers education for The Desert Sun. Reach him at jonathan.horwitz@desertsun.com or @Writes_Jonathan.