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College of the Desert's reign of secrecy needs to end

Desert Sun Editorial Board

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College of the Desert's decision to cancel an automotive training center in Cathedral City came out of the blue, shocking even the mayor — but that suddenness shouldn't be a surprise.

Disturbingly, it seems to be the way those in charge at COD operate these days.

Many moves under the current board of trustees and the new president it hired over the summer, Martha Garcia, seem to be happening with little or no public discussion.

A taxpayer-funded institution serving the entire Coachella Valley is supposed to work with residents, businesses and elected governments — and keep them informed.

Instead, it seems almost everyone outside a small power bubble is in the dark.

What's happening with a campus in Palm Springs that's been envisioned for almost 20 years? Just like their neighbors in Cathedral City, the mayor and city council members say they don't really know.

But at the same time, across the valley, COD has recently decided to lease classroom and office space in two Coachella buildings. And there have been early talks about a possible full campus.

How does that fit into regional plans for COD's future? It's unclear. If there is a new larger strategy, it hasn't been shared.

The Palm Springs City Council voted Thursday to send Garcia a letter criticizing the college's recent lack of transparency and asking for more information about where COD's west valley projects stand.

Councilwoman Grace Garner said COD did send the city some records, as Garcia promised during a private event Wednesday that Garner and Garcia both attended.

But officials want to know more.*

As for COD, its top leaders are speaking mainly in bland generalities these days, so it's hard to divine what's behind all this.

But actions speak loudly, and they reflect a disturbing arrogance.

Common sense tells us a new school president isn't going to make major decisions without the trustees who hired her being on board — not if she wants to keep her job.

The board is a public body, required by the state Constitution and laws to conduct meetings and other business in the open whenever possible. So where is the sunshine?

COD is not a private business, but it seems to be acting like one.

The arrogance extends even to one move that was made publicly, sort of.

Garcia, with board approval, just hired a new executive vice president on an 18-month contract. That official, Christina Tafoya of Imperial Valley College, served with Garcia when both worked at Imperial Valley College.

Tafoya, who has a doctorate in dental surgery and experience in community college administration, may or may not be qualified. That's not really the point. Why did this have to happen suddenly? Were other people besides the president's longtime colleague considered for this \$250,000-a-year job? Unclear.

Garcia said the new executive will help move construction and other projects forward and gave a typically bureaucratic answer about why she chose Tafoya, saying: "I am confident in her skills, abilities, and knowledge to fulfill the position's requirements."

One person's hire is relatively small potatoes. But amid the continuing lack of openness, some of the bigger decisions risk wasting years or decades of work — and money — that's already been poured into expected COD facilities.

The Cathedral City automotive center had been in the works for almost five years. COD spent \$22 million to buy the site of the old Palm Springs mall for a new campus.

Garcia told The Desert Sun recently there is "definitely a commitment" to move forward with a west valley campus. But will it be at the scale announced in 2020? She said only that "additional evaluation" needs to happen.

A cancellation or drastic downsizing of plans in Palm Springs, especially without a clear public process, would be a bait and switch on voters. They signed off on \$900 million-plus in tax

hikes in 2004 and 2016 to pay for COD bonds pitched as a way to fund the Palm Springs campus, among other improvements.

That's not how you treat voters. First, it's just wrong. Second, what are citizens going to say next time COD comes, hat in hand, asking for more tax money?

Adding to the opacity, COD's board discussed possible sites for a new campus in Coachella behind closed doors. So it's hard to say what's really driving it.

This shouldn't become an east valley vs. west valley issue. Residents of Indio, for example, are also wondering whether plans for COD facilities there are under re-examination as the college makes moves in Coachella.

If COD wants to prove it's acting in good faith, one simple step would be to sign a conflict-of-interest waiver so Palm Springs' city attorney, Jeffrey Ballinger, can analyze the legal issues involved in the talks between the college and city. (A different attorney at Ballinger's firm represents COD, meaning he can't work for the city on the issue without the college's permission.) But COD hasn't even done that, so Palm Springs could end up spending \$500,000 on outside counsel. That would be outrageous.

Palm Springs Mayor Christy Holstege recently called the way COD is operating "truly shocking."

Garcia may be right about the need for "additional evaluation" on the Palm Springs campus and other projects.

A lot has changed in the past two years, and it might make sense to put a pause on expansion plans.

Given the pandemic's forced move to online learning — and a survey showing a lot of students like it that way — it's reasonable to ask whether COD needs the same kind of major physical campuses around the valley that once made sense.

But if that's what's behind this, why sign those leases in Coachella and keep making moves toward a new campus there?

Whatever happens needs to be decided in the open, truly.

The fact a decision is on a public agenda and rubber-stamped by a board during an open meeting doesn't, by itself, make the process transparent. There needs to be just as much openness about why decisions are made.

Crucially, that also allows for real public participation, not just for-the-record public comment before a vote at a meeting when, in reality, the decision has been made.

It's time for Garcia and the board to open the doors, literally and metaphorically. Stop the secrecy and discuss everything you can in public.

Talk about what's going on, honestly and like humans. Not just in jargon about "additional evaluation."

The Palm Springs council's letter might have put it best about how COD's leaders have been acting:

"This is not how we do business as governmental agencies, and this is not how we cooperate in our region for the success of our students."

Editor's note: *An earlier version of this editorial indicated COD did not say what documents it had provided to Palm Springs. Among the documents provided were, according to the city: COD annual reports 2019-2020; College of the Desert Citizens' Bond Oversight Committee Report from Sept. 14, 2021; Citizens' Bond Oversight Committee Reports from 2019 and 2020; Measure B Audit Report 2019-2020; Measure CC Audit Report for 2019-2020; official Measure CC ballot language; COD expansion plans details flyer; Measure CC frequently asked questions; and "a draft schematic sample" from a workshop on March 10, 2021.*