
COD leaders' secrecy and stumbles continue. The public needs to speak up.

Facing growing public confusion and outrage over College of the Desert leaders' failure to be open with the public, COD trustees decided to [hire a consulting firm to improve the school's image](#) — and did so without discussion or explanation.

That irony shows the trustees and President Martha Garcia still don't get it, despite repeated pledges of transparency.

Did the elected Board of Trustees sign off on this \$24,000 deal in secret? No: The item is technically “public,” in that it appeared on the agenda for their last public meeting. But it was as close to secret as you can get without violating the law.

If you're starting to get a feeling of déjà vu, it's not just in your head. We wrote editorials in [November](#) and [December](#) about a “reign of secrecy” at the top of COD that put the whole institution's credibility at risk. And here we are in January.

We don't want to keep saying this. We want COD to succeed. We'd love to write an editorial saying things are finally moving in the right direction.

But we can't yet.

COD has been an engine of the Coachella Valley's success for over 60 years, but the goodwill and trust it's earned over that time are in danger.

The problems have not gone away. If anything, they seem to be getting worse.

We worry that, before much longer, the damage to the school — in perception and reality — will be beyond repair. That would be devastating for the valley, as well as for thousands of hardworking students, faculty and staff who don't deserve to be tarnished by top leaders' bumbling failures.

COD has a budget of over \$100 million a year. But Garcia and the trustees' handling of the \$24,000 consulting deal approved on Jan. 13 are a microcosm, showing the faults in how they deal with issues big and small.

Trustees sign off on contracts all the time, and not every one warrants airing out during their meetings. If that happened, they'd meet all day and night.

But when college brass' lack of openness is under a microscope, you'd think they would make doubly sure to be open about a deal to help them “enhance public perception,” among other things.

Yet the contract with HR Advantage was explained only in [a 73-word summary tucked into a list of 18 contracts](#) on the trustees' meeting agenda.

And that list was [one of 18 items on the “consent agenda,”](#) items considered so routine or uncontroversial they're not discussed separately but voted on as a block.

That agenda item's title: “Approval of Contracts / Agreements / Amendments / Revenue Agreements / Non-Monetary Agreements.”

It would be hard to find a better case of hiding something in plain sight.

Even if you get past the layers of obfuscation and read those 73 words, they raise more questions than they answer.

Sound familiar? It's just like how the COD brass have handled and explained the future of the Palm Springs campus.

We remain perplexed about what's happening, and the most recent trustees meeting only muddied the waters. [COD leaders invited a bond lawyer who seemed to cast shadows over](#) whether some of the plan — such as a learning hotel — would be allowable uses of bond money. Yet he also said he had not been retained by the school to provide professional advice, nor given adequate information about the project ahead of his invitation to speak.

Nevertheless, the board adopted a resolution to “reaffirm” its commitment to Measure B and Measure CC bond expenditures. Several citizens of Palm Springs rightly spoke up at the meeting to say that those pledges lacked specificity.

Meanwhile, we're still waiting for answers about what's going to happen with the Cathedral City automotive training center. And the feet-dragging on whether to let Palm Springs' own city attorney advise officials about all of COD's plans there, costing the city up to \$500,000 for an outside lawyer. And [repeated failure to give legally required information](#) about what trustees were discussing in closed session.

And on and on.

If HR Advantage can indeed “enhance public perception” of COD leadership after all that, \$24,000 will be a bargain.

We're not saying hiring this firm was a bad idea — indeed, we don't have enough information to say that. It may be a good idea, considering all the problems, and the school might even need something more serious like a crisis management firm.

But why was HR Advantage chosen? Were other companies considered? Why did the board and Garcia think this was a good idea? No one said.

And that's not all. Under the same consent agenda item and equally unexplained were three contracts potentially worth over \$100,000 with consultant Cambridge West, one of which will involve “developing an updated timeline for the Palm Springs property.”

Hard to find something that would be of greater public interest. Yet once again, it went unexplained, even though in December a proposal to spend \$49,000 on a new feasibility study by Cambridge West for the campus was pulled from the trustees' agenda after [Garcia learned parts of one had been completed in 2016](#).

The pattern continues, and Garcia and trustees don't seem to be listening — or perhaps they're simply incapable of fixing some of these problems.

[The terms of two of the board's five members](#), Chair Rubén AríAztlán Pérez and Aurora Wilson, are up this year. Voters need to think seriously about whether they deserve to continue.

And more residents who care about COD's future have to start speaking up.

The trustees hold regular meetings once a month, with occasional special meetings.

Finding all the details can be a hassle, so we've made it easy for you. The regular meeting schedule is at tinyurl.com/2022CODmeetings. And agendas and special meeting dates are at tinyurl.com/CODagendas.

Let them know what you think.