District Academic Senate News

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Bond Program Centralized

We haven't written to you about the bond building program for some time. In fact, the last articles were in 2012, when then-Chancellor La Vista initiated a moratorium on bond construction, as the district attempted to fix various problems identified by a blue ribbon panel. All of this, of course, followed from the series of Los Angeles Times' articles and the firing of Executive Facilities Director Larry Eisenberg in early 2011.

The new Board majority elected that year was determined to take firm control of the bond program. To achieve that goal, in late 2012 they hired James O'Reilly as Eisenberg's permanent replacement. He came from a background with LAUSD and Parsons. That was followed in the spring of 2013 by the replacement of URS by AECOM as the district program manager. AECOM is a major, international firm, based here in Los Angeles, with high aspirations to be a "complete provider" of building services.

In a series of changes, the new leadership has dramatically centralized control, stressing enhanced quality control and greater efficiency. As O'Reilly likes to say, there is now just "one throat to choke." This is clearly the organizational structure that the Board prefers, or at least the majority membership of the Board Facilities and Building Committee. The most dramatic illustration of this change was the decision to terminate the college program manager firms, in favor of hiring individuals that report directly to AECOM and O'Reilly.

It has been difficult to assess the effectiveness of the new management up to this point. Their reports to the Bond Steering Committee and to the Board committee have been generally persuasive. But in recent months, serious misgivings have emerged. First, it's hard to believe that the program was as poorly run as the new leadership claims. To hear them tell it, the past CPM's were all incompetent and wasted an enormous amount of bond money. Certainly, there were problems at some campuses, but the total condemnation sounds self-serving.

Second, a number of recent revelations have challenged the notion that AECOM is giving us their best people. In some cases, individuals accused in the past of professional misconduct have been employed by AECOM in important positions. While these people were never convicted of a crime, it is still troubling to see this, given all the problems we have had with our bond program. Even more concerning, one individual who pleaded guilty to a work-related felony charge in an apparent plea bargain is now working for AECOM on district business.

Third, the recent selection of the replacement CPM's was bizarre and disturbing. Of some 210 applicants, only around 20 survived AECOM's initial screening. After initial technical interviews, that number was reduced to thirteen. College presidents were then asked to select from this very limited pool. As best we can determine, only two of the thirteen have much community college experience. Faculty and staff were given no opportunity to participate whatsoever.

In many respects, the bond program seems to be better run in recent years, but the total control exercised by O'Reilly and AECOM, a model based largely on his experience in LAUSD, is troubling. Even with the best of staffing, it's questionable whether a large district building program can be successfully managed so centrally. These recent hires just raise further concern. In any case, shared governance is clearly weakened, as all authority resides in the hands of one Board committee and James O'Reilly.

Don Gauthier and I will be taking our concerns to the chancellor again, as well as some trustees. In addition, we will be writing you on related bond issues in the near future. In the meanwhile, we will continue to represent you on the Bond Steering Committee along with Joanne Waddell and Carole Anderson from the AFT.

David Beaulieu
DAS Vice President