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NEWS

Cathedral City invites residents to a rally Saturday to 'Save COD Auto Center'



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The municipal government of Cathedral City is inviting residents to a rally downtown on Saturday to pressure College of the Desert officials to build a long-planned automotive training center within city limits.

"Normally the city wouldn't take a rally position, you know, we don't go out and do those kinds of things," Councilmember Nancy Ross told The Desert Sun. "But this is unique."

Saturday's "Build It Here" rally will take place at the Cathedral City Festival Lawn at 68-600 Avenida Lalo Guerrero, adjacent to the Civic Center, beginning at 9 a.m.

"It's the public's opportunity to provide input that has been lacking in COD's decision-making process," according to a Facebook post on the city's official government account. "Our students deserve equal access to a higher education and the resulting good paying jobs they can get after completing their education at Roadrunner Motors."

In October, COD Superintendent/President Martha Garcia said the college would pause its plan to develop the Roadrunner Motors facility off East Palm Canyon and Margot Murphy Way in Cathedral City.

Garcia said an initial fiscal analysis suggested that completing the facility at that site would cause the project to finish more than \$13 million over budget, a 67% increase over initial cost estimates.

Then-Cathedral City Mayor Raymond Gregory said in a statement at the time that the decision to cancel the project was made unilaterally by the college without any advance consultation with local officials, staff or the public, and promises to spend local bond money in Cathedral City had been broken.

"It seems apparent those promises and that trust have been violated in the raw exercise of political power, outside the prescribed process and without transparency. It is just wrong," Gregory said.

In January, the college clarified that \$3 million of the projected cost overruns had previously been approved by the board for buying the land off East Palm Canyon.

In February, Cathedral City Mayor Ernesto Gutierrez joined a Zoom call with Palm Springs Mayor Lisa Middleton and 150 Coachella Valley residents to raise concerns about the college's management of construction projects.

"We will continue to work hard to hold (the) College of the Desert board and its president accountable for their promises to our voters," Gutierrez said.

The call was organized by Promises Made-Promises Broken, a self-described watchdog group that has launched print and digital media campaigns calling on Garcia and the trustees that voted for her to resign. The group's spokesperson, Palm Springs resident Bruce Hoban, has not said who else is involved and who is funding the political ads.

Weeks later, Cathedral City's city council agreed to extend an invitation to Garcia to speak at a forthcoming council meeting or a special meeting, but the two parties have not yet agreed on a time to meet in public.

COD Board of Trustees Chair Ruben Perez said the Board of Trustees will convene a special public meeting on Wednesday, April 6, to discuss the future of the Roadrunner Motors site. A college spokesperson confirmed the meeting will start at 3:30 p.m. However, the college has not yet officially announced the meeting, and the meeting's agenda has not been posted online.

Garcia and Perez met privately on Wednesday afternoon with Gutierrez and City Manager Charlie McClendon to discuss project options, Perez confirmed to The Desert Sun.

"(There is) no real update yet, but the meeting was productive and we are still working together in good faith," Perez said after the meeting. "We will be meeting again after April 6th and before April 22nd. I did ask to be a part of the rally and to speak." COD's next regularly-scheduled board meeting is on April 22.

McClendon said after the meeting, "We shared a lot of information that helped us to both understand I think a little better each others' positions, and we're all committed to working

together, and I think we'll make that happen."

McClendon added that the COD officials told him and Gutierrez that a decision about the Roadrunner Motors campus will not be made at the April 6 special board meeting, and it is more likely to be made on April 22.

"The board is considering three sites," Perez said. "The original site, an alternative site in Cathedral City and a site in Indio by I-10 Auto Mall."

'We're talking about political responsibility'

The Roadrunner Motors Project is one project of many financed by Measure CC, a \$577 million bond measure approved by Coachella Valley voters in 2016 for college capital construction projects.

Garcia also has called for a reevaluation of plans for a \$345 million campus in Palm Springs. Construction on that campus is paused until June, at least. Meanwhile, the college has proceeded with construction on a \$67.5 million Indio campus expansion and a \$22.1 million Indio child development center.

Some trustees support redistributing the bond money across the valley's cities.

"As I've been on the board, I've always advocated for the bond money to be used a little more equitably throughout the entire district," Perez said after the March 18 Board of Trustees meeting.

During that meeting, Trustee Bea Gonzalez described the college's bond funds as "a beautiful opportunity for economic development."

"I'm sure every single city here that was promised a campus would love to see some of the bond money used to revitalize some of their downtown areas," she said. "And talking a little bit to the mayor of Cathedral City, he mentioned that as well. Like [their downtown] needs a facelift. So, you know, I want us to be mindful of how do we spread this love? ... I'm sure everyone would love to use bond money to revitalize their downtown areas."

Gonzalez declined a request by The Desert Sun to clarify her statements.

Although Gonzalez mentioned investing in Cathedral City in particular, Ross told The Desert Sun she was concerned by what she heard.

"We're trying to spread the love — okay, first of all, I don't even know what the hell that means," Ross said. "Because we're not talking about love. We're talking about responsibility, political responsibility, among the leaders of our valley, which includes Cathedral City on up."

This is a developing story; check back later for more details.

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