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College of the Desert wants to 'revitalize' cities? Start with vacant Palm Springs eyesore

Desert Sun Editorial Board

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Among the many bizarre things said at a recent College of the Desert board meeting was Trustee Bea Gonzalez's suggestion to use millions of dollars meant for a new Palm Springs campus to "revitalize" downtowns across the valley instead.

That's not a community college's job.

But if for some reason COD leaders decide they want to beautify cities, they could start with the gaping 29-acre eyesore they've left for years in the middle of Palm Springs.

That's the land the college bought in 2018, which is supposed to be the future home of its west valley campus. It now sits empty, with chunks of the perimeter wall crumbling, the rubble dotted with weeds and trees, some of which are dead or dying.

It's one of the first things tourists headed downtown from the airport get to see. That's not helping the city put its best foot forward.

Meanwhile, a new housing development sprung up across Farrell Drive over the past couple of years. Others are in the works nearby as demand and prices boom.

The story about when a Palm Springs campus will finally open keeps changing. But the latest estimate from COD is that it will happen no sooner than late 2026 or early 2027.

Also unclear is whether that campus will look anything like the one promised to voters who approved \$577 million in taxes, sold on the promise that most of it would pay for COD's west valley expansion.

Regardless, Palm Springs is facing at least three more years before any construction begins.

So COD needs to take steps now to fix the blight created by its inaction. Among the possibilities: improvements to the perimeter, removing unsightly vegetation, fixing broken walls, and even some temporary art in cooperation with the city's Public Arts Commission.

At COD's March 18 meeting, perhaps even stranger than Gonzalez's broad comments about "spreading this love" with downtown revitalizations was that she singled out Cathedral City, saying Mayor Ernesto Gutierrez had told her the downtown "needs a facelift."

Why strange? COD had long planned a major new automotive training center just west of that very downtown, amid the cluster of car dealerships and repair shops along Highway 111.

But it reversed course in October, citing increased costs. As in Palm Springs, that's the exact opposite of helping the city.

And unused lots — even the huge one in Palm Springs — are small potatoes compared to the deeper concerns posed by COD leaders' new line of rhetoric about the west valley campus.

Sudden talk of downtown revitalizations and whether Palm Springs really needs a long-planned "learning hotel" to train COD students for hospitality careers could all be laying a pretext for redirecting money to other parts of the Coachella Valley.

As we've said before, that would be a broken promise and a bait and switch on voters, who approved a 2016 bond measure after a campaign promising a major Palm Springs campus.

At that March 18 meeting, Gonzalez said the millions of dollars at the college's disposal represent "a beautiful opportunity for economic development."

We could also think of a lot of things to do with \$577 million. But this isn't the college's money to spend as it wishes. The bond language gives COD broad latitude legally on how to spend the money. Yet it belongs to the public, which entrusted the school with it based on promises.

For now, the college should do what it can in the short term to improve the appearance of the Palm Springs site while it figures out what, exactly, it is going to build there and when.

