

Desert Sun.

EDUCATION

COD Palm Springs campus could face more delays after board deadlocks on contract



Jonathan Horwitz

Palm Springs Desert Sun

Published 1:44 p.m. PT May 19, 2023 | Updated 2:19 p.m. PT May 19, 2023

There could be additional delays to the long-awaited College of the Desert Palm Springs campus after the board of trustees deadlocked on a contract amendment for the project's design consultant.

Without the \$5.6 million contract amendment, the design consultant, WRNS Studio, will proceed to finish the campus' schematic design in June; however, the firm will not proceed with the next phases of planning.

That could "cause significant delays and increases to the construction costs of the project," said Robert Rauscher, program manager with MAAS Companies, another consultant for COD.

The board voted 2-2 on the contract amendment, with Ruben Perez and Bea Gonzalez opposing it. The split decision means the motion failed. (The board is holding a meeting later Friday to appoint a fifth trustee to replace former Area 3 representative Fred Jandt, who resigned at the end of March.)

Perez and Gonzalez expressed concern about the overall cost of the Palm Springs project. The project is budgeted at over \$400 million since February, including roughly \$350 million from Measure CC, a 2016 bond, and \$40 million from Measure B, a 2004 bond.

"With costs rising all the time, I just have a feeling that this project is going to be way, way over (budget) and not to the fault of anyone, but it's definitely going to impact somewhere," Gonzalez said.

WRNS Studio has already earned a good chunk of that taxpayer money, having won contracts worth more than \$20 million for work on the Palm Springs campus.

If the amendment is eventually approved, WRNS Studio could ultimately earn up to \$25.9 million for its work designing, redesigning and overseeing construction aspects of the project on the 27-acre campus at the site of the old Palm Springs mall.

In November 2020, WRNS Studio won a \$4.2 million contract to finish designing the Palm Springs campus. To earn the contract, the firm had already won a design competition and finished 50% of schematic design site, according to that contract. Schematic design is typically a rough construction drawing that offers a general overview of a project's basic features and construction cost estimates. It's usually the first phase of the architectural design process.

But after former superintendent/president Joel Kinnamon retired in March 2021, COD reevaluated its plans for the Palm Springs campus under the leadership of Superintendent/President Martha Garcia.

At a forum last August, college officials said the project had 0% of schematic design complete.

In November, WRNS Studio signed a second, much larger contract with COD to complete new designs and oversee subsequent aspects of the project.

The second contract for \$16.9 million was to oversee the Palm Springs development project's schematic design, design development and construction documents phases.

But the board voted 3-2 in February to have the firm again draft new plans — essentially finishing plans started under Kinnamon's administration with some modifications. Gonzalez and Perez also voted against these plans, citing concerns they would cause further delays.

New schematics are 90% complete, officials announced at a project committee meeting Wednesday.

They call for about 40% less gross square footage of construction on the campus relative to 2021 plans, but they're larger than the plan presented to the board before February.

Consequently, WRNS Studio is requesting more money.

”The original contract of \$16.1 million was based on a smaller project, and we have now increased the size of that project and the scope of that project to return to the March 2021 scheme as directed, and so there is a commensurate increase of the design fees across the board,” Rauscher said. “This covers the architecture firm and all the engineering and consulting firms involved with the project, as well.”

“The good news is that the rate of their fee has not increased,” Rauscher added. “They’re still at approximately 8% (of construction costs) , which is right at the median level of the market for these kinds of services.”

Rauscher and the contract amendment summary presented to the board Friday referred to the 2022 contract as worth \$16.1 million, but the contract document itself puts the original figure at \$16.9 million.

And while the new plans do harken back to the spirit of the 2021 scheme, they come back at a smaller scale, mostly due to the elimination of a 94,000-square-foot learning hotel.

Aside from buildings along South Farrell Drive, the 27-acre site will be consumed by a large parking lot, a maintenance and operations yard and landscaping along most of East Tahquitz Canyon Way.

College officials have said there could eventually be another phase of construction and Trustee Joel Kinnamon, the former superintendent/president, has not publicly given up on the idea of building and operating a college-run hotel down the road.

But additional construction would require more funding — possibly another bond measure. Plus, the first phase of construction is not scheduled to be finished until late 2026.

If trustees decide not to retain the design consultant, that target date could be kicked even further down the road.

Jonathan Horwitz covers education for The Desert Sun. Reach him at jonathan.horwitz@desertsun.com.

