

# COD's credibility and public support are at risk. Its leaders must act now.

College of the Desert has [educated more than 125,000 people](#) in the Coachella Valley since its founding in 1958, a number that shows its importance to the region.

COD gives educational opportunity to thousands of recent high school graduates and helps adults looking to change careers or build new skills.

Local employers look to the college to train the next generation of nurses, auto mechanics and hospitality and green-energy workers. That's especially key now, when some hotels and restaurants are desperate for employees.

So it's key that the people in charge at COD, entrusted to lead a vital valley institution, be competent, trustworthy and transparent.

That's been harder and harder to believe the past few months.

COD leaders have given mixed messages about the fate of a long-planned Palm Springs campus for which local taxpayers agreed to spend hundreds of millions of dollars. And they suddenly declared they could not build the Roadrunner Motors campus on the Cathedral City site they'd bought for it.

Equally alarming, those moves seemed to catch the city councils — and residents — in Palm Springs, Cathedral City and the rest of the valley entirely by surprise.

After the delays and secrecy led to fierce blowback, the school's new superintendent/president made some bold statements.

A [new six-month feasibility study](#) on the Palm Springs campus would get the project back on track, Martha Garcia said, and COD would be an open book with the public and city officials.

"I am committed to transparency," Garcia told The Desert Sun's Editorial Board last week.

We applaud the sentiment. But within 48 hours of that meeting, two things she'd said had already been proven wrong.

The key study she said had not been done on the new campus? Much of it had been done — and was [on the COD website the whole time](#), as a Desert Sun reporter quickly found. The move Garcia said the college had made on a legal issue? [It hadn't happened](#), the law firm involved said.

The big questions remain unanswered. When will a Palm Springs campus be built? What will it look like? With the feasibility study now called off, the timeline is unclear.

Where will the Roadrunner Motors training center go? Garcia said Indio is a possibility, but that's not for sure.

Worse, it's beginning to look like Garcia and some of the others in charge of COD either are withholding the full truth from the public or are in the dark themselves — or a mix of the two.

This isn't just some political power struggle.

Those who'll pay dearly if COD leaders keep bungling things include current and potential students, valley businesses and the college staffers who work hard to give students a better future.

And, of course, the taxpayers who'll keep repaying the hundreds of millions of dollars in loans taken out to help the school grow. Whatever happens to the new campuses, property tax bills will still be due every six months.

In a Dec. 14 meeting with the Editorial Board, Garcia said she was befuddled how prior COD leaders could have spent \$22 million to buy the site of the old Palm Springs mall without a feasibility study on a future campus.

That's because it hadn't happened that way.

We've urged COD leaders to be more transparent, and we continue to. Along with Garcia, Board of Trustees Chair Aurora Wilson promised it during the Editorial Board meeting.

But transparency is no good if the information they're sharing is wrong.

There are a couple of straightforward steps the college needs to take soon. Its board of trustees should immediately pass a resolution removing [a legal snag that has stopped Palm Springs officials from talking to their own city attorney](#) about COD. (Such "conflict-of-interest waivers" are common.)

And the college needs to lay out, as soon as possible but within a month or two, a clear timeline for building the Palm Springs campus.

If the public doesn't believe — soon — that steady leadership is in place at COD, we worry the community will lose faith in the school. As Palm Springs Mayor Lisa Middleton said after Garcia's reversal on the feasibility study, the "broad support that College of the Desert has earned and held for many years is at risk."

So the time to act is now.

We'll be watching, and so will the people.