

Delta College gets poor marks in grand jury report

By Nick Baptista/ The Valley Springs News/ Friday, July 4, 2014

San Joaquin Delta Community College District's failure to expand educational opportunities to Calaveras County students was the focus of a grand jury report released earlier this week.

The Calaveras County grand jury's investigation looked into what happened with election promises of a Valley Springs area satellite campus and whether the community college district was adequately fulfilling the educational needs of students in the north portion of the county.

Voters within the community college district passed Measure L in 2004. The measure granted the college district authority to issue \$250 million in bonds for construction projects including an education center in the Valley Springs area. Calaveras County property owners will pay nearly \$11 million during the life of the bond issue.

A proposal for a 60-acre Valley Springs satellite campus was dropped in 2007 when cost over-runs on other Delta projects quickly eroded the pot of Measure L money and a 2010 plan to build a six-acre college learning center for about \$2 million was nixed due to projected costs, the recession and questions whether Calaveras County campus would attract enough students to make it feasible to operate.

Although the measure contained language that did not guarantee the Valley Springs area would receive a satellite campus, the 2013-14 grand jury came out with a finding that it is a detriment for the county to be split among two community districts- Delta and Yosemite Community College District- and a recommendation that the county pursue action to secede from Delta.

However, prior to this week's release of the grand jury report, Delta College officials have been meeting with community leaders, including District 1 Supervisor Cliff Edson, to address concerns that local students' educational needs were not being fulfilled by the community college district.

"They were already doing the right thing before the grand jury report," Edson said about Delta officials' recent meetings with him and his group to offer more college classes in the county.

Delta College is resuming evening classes next fall on the Calaveras High School campus. Those classes will include English, history and computer science.

The college plans to offer even more local classes in spring 2015, Edson said, and build up to 24 units of local classes within three years.

Another step forward is the hiring of a community liaison, Edson said. The person will be from the community, paid by Delta, and “act as the eyes and ears for Delta to let them know what we need up here” in terms of education programs. The liaison will also work with local schools and Yosemite to coordinate and expand higher education offerings to local students.

He sees the progress as being helpful to the county, with the potential to keep students at home for much of their higher education needs and producing an educated workforce for potential employers.

Classes closer to home reduce the cost of higher education on the county’s families, keeps our younger generation within the county instead of being forced to leave, and has the potential to attract students from elsewhere to pursue their education here and add to the local economy, Edson said.

Steve Castellanos, the Area 5 member of the Delta Board of Trustees, was disappointed the grand jury report did not reflect discussions Delta officials and Edson’s committee have had for several months.

“This can be fixed,” said Castellanos of Valley Springs, but he did not rule out the grand jury’s recommendation to pull out of Delta.

“We’re perfectly open to what’s best for the county and the students,” he said, “and having discussions on the different options. But it’s a long road to go down (leaving the district) and elections are involved.”

Castellanos anticipated the Delta board would discuss the grand jury report at its next meeting or one in the near future and provide a response to the panel’s findings and recommendations.

The downturn in the economy and its impact on the state budget has had a significant financial impact on Delta’s ability to meet the needs of all of its students, Castellanos said.

The state underfunded higher education the past five or six years, he said, and community colleges were given a cap on the number of students they could serve.

The colleges received a 2 percent growth allowance this year, the first growth allowance in about half a dozen years, he added.

“I understand the frustrations. It doesn’t make sense for the legislature to limit growth when there’s a recession and more people are looking to take classes.”

He hopes county leaders are patient as Delta begins to provide more classes in the area and gets the word out about those offerings.

“If these things don’t work, then look at the alternatives,” Castellanos suggested.

Whether north Calaveras stays with Delta or looks at transferring to Yosemite, it will remain a small voting component within either district, he added.

Another grand jury finding said the proposed satellite campus off Paloma Road, known as the Foothill Center Project, has the potential to serve as a technical college campus.

Landowner Tom Coe said he remains open to providing some of his property for such a learning center, but other educational institutions have expressed “strong interest” in pursuing the site for a higher center, including Reedley College based in Reedley, Calif.

“I’m willing to work in any positive direction,” Coe said.

Dave Tanner, who has worked with Coe on developing the college learning center in Valley Springs, and ran unsuccessfully against Castellanos for the Area 5 seat on the college board, said he was pleased the grand jury investigated the issue, but was apprehensive whether Delta would fulfill its obligations to local students.

“I’m glad they (the grand jury) realized where the problems are and that we’re paying and not getting the classes and services we need from Delta,” Tanner said.

He added Yosemite’s Columbia College has been “extremely accommodating” to students coming out of Calaveras High School and the county being in one district, namely Yosemite, might be a desirable alternative to the present situation.

Access to higher education could even be closer if Yosemite develops property it has in Angels Camp, Tanner said, and maybe the Coe property could be developed by Yosemite.

Another player in the higher education picture could be Amador County, which does not belong to a community college district, but could be willing to enter a partnership if Calaveras can leave Delta, Tanner added.

“It’s nice that people are beginning to learn more about this situation and I’m grateful the grand jury did this report,” Tanner said. “I commend them for what they did in finding that it’s not fair to the people of Calaveras who are writing their checks to Delta.”

Edson is the guest speaker at Wednesday’s meeting of the Wallace-Burson Association. One of the topics he will discuss is the effort to expand higher education opportunities in the county and Delta’s new class offerings. The July 9 meeting begins at 7 p.m. in the Cal-Co fire house at State Route 12 and Burson Road.