

Dear friends of Southwestern College and fellow members of the South Bay community:

In case you didn't see this on Sunday, the U-T published an opinion article by Governing Board President Norma L. Hernandez and Superintendent/President Dr. Melinda Nish elaborating on the college's new and continuing efforts to guarantee transparency and institutional integrity. [We welcome your feedback.](#)

Rebuilding credibility at Southwestern College

By Norma L. Hernandez & Melinda Nish

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All challenges present opportunities. Southwestern College and its governing board are seizing the opportunity presented by multiple, serious challenges to build a greater future for the college, our students and the South Bay community. Facing ongoing media scrutiny and continuing investigations into past business practices concerning projects funded through Proposition R, the \$389 million bond issue approved in 2008, Southwestern College and its governing board are doing more than just getting to the bottom of what happened. Our goal is to raise the bar -- to set a new standard for transparent decision-making and institutional integrity.

Southwestern College's board responded expeditiously and thoroughly since it first became aware of potential problems a year ago. In addition to cooperating fully with the District Attorney's Office, the board commissioned an independent Focused Special Review that objectively details the college's business practices, including those of its foundation.

The Internal Analysis and Action Plan, which were released on March 15 with the Focused Special Review, lay out the steps the college is taking to strengthen its business procedures and improve its contracting and procurement policies. The documents are available in their entirety for review on the Southwestern College website – <http://swccd.edu/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=2367>

There are seven recommendations in the Internal Analysis and 20 steps outlined in the Action Plan. All Action Plan steps will be implemented within the next 12 months. These actions are intended to strengthen the college's fiduciary oversight and ensure transparency in all Southwestern College's business practices and procurement procedures. The actions range from revising and strengthening the college's Code of Ethics and Conflict of Interest policy to creating procedural firewalls to preserve the integrity of the college's contracting processes.

Southwestern College's commitment to transparency is evident in many of its action steps. For instance, effective immediately all documentation for contract consideration by the governing board will include at a minimum the Request for Proposal or Qualifications announcement, the names of all firms that responded, the selection committee members and a written rationale for the firm being recommended.

Additionally, all Form 700 Conflict of Interest statements filed with Southwestern College will be posted on [the college's website](#).

Meanwhile, the college began ethics training for its management team in January and the governing board held a workshop on procurement and contracting in February.

Simultaneously, Southwestern College will be rephasing Proposition R to complete construction by 2025, a full 10 years earlier than initially planned. This will potentially save taxpayers millions of dollars and allow students and the community to use the facilities a decade earlier than previously projected.

By taking time now to strengthen internal controls and develop plans for rephasing Proposition R projects, Southwestern College and its board will ensure that all work meets the needs of our students and makes better use of taxpayers' money.

Developing a new look for Proposition R is important for several reasons. Early plans were based on assumptions that are no longer valid. College and community growth projections used in the original planning for Proposition R need to be reassessed.

Therefore, over the next 12 months, the campus will modify and update Southwestern College's Educational and Facilities Master plans. These plans will determine the college's buildings, infrastructure, information technology and parking needs.

The rephasing plan will re-evaluate all Proposition R projects, including the Corner Lot. Our priority in this process is to preserve and maintain the intent of voters who overwhelmingly supported passage of Proposition R. The re-evaluation will not affect ongoing work with the Field House, the collegewide central plant, the expansion of the National City center or the Elmhurst and Gotham entryways.

Southwestern College and our board are doing more than the minimum. We will fully implement action steps developing procedures and protocols that both embrace sound business practices and include safeguards against abuses that occurred in the past. We will use the challenges facing the college to reshape our institution by setting and reaching new standards of transparency in decision-making, institutional integrity, and solid achievement of our Proposition R goals.

Southwestern College and its board are committed to achieving these goals because our students and our community demand and deserve nothing less.

Hernandez is president of the Southwestern College Governing Board. Nish is the superintendent/president of Southwestern College.