



Battle to Save City College Divides Teachers and Administration

By Jamie Goldberg
December 14, 2012



Over 100 Christmas carolers braved the cold Thursday night to sing outside the City College of San Francisco Board of Trustees meeting. The chorus included faculty, staff and students who earlier had lobbied for San Francisco's Proposition A, a parcel tax touted as a measure to save City College.

But last night, led by the American Federation of Teachers Local 2121, they sang a different tune, protesting the college administration's plans for

spending that parcel tax money: "We want to serve our students, and retire someday, keep benefits and pay, but they just don't care what we say!"

Supporters of the eight-year, \$79 per parcel tax, which passed with 73 percent of the vote this November, had hoped that the \$16 million per year in new revenue would be used to prevent layoffs, offset budget cuts and maintain classes at the financially struggling school — as outlined in the proposition.

Now, however, the college is proposing to put Prop. A funds toward other things, including technology upgrades, facility maintenance, retiree health benefit costs, professional development and shoring up its reserve, said Larry Kamer, consultant and acting City College spokesman. Those items were set forth in a July report by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges. The college has until March 15 to show that it's complying with the commission's recommendations in order to stay accredited.

In the first year that City College receives Prop. A funds, roughly 50 percent of the money could go to funding the college's depleted reserve, Kamer said. Five percent of the budget is supposed to be in the reserve every year, according to recommendations by the State Chancellor's Office.

"If we continue to maintain accreditation, we stay open," Kamer said. "If we don't, we cease to exist."

But while the college is proposing to fund items outlined in the accreditation report, it also is continuing to lay off teachers and asking faculty to accept greater pay cuts, restructuring of departments, raising the cost of classes and cutting courses.

Alisa Messer, president of the American Federation of Teachers Local 2121, said the college is asking teachers to take an immediate 8.8 percent wage cut, on top of a 2.85 percent wage cut the union agreed to earlier this year. The college also wants the union to accept a 5 percent ongoing wage cut or equivalent reduction starting next year. Meanwhile, the district recently laid off 19 counselors and other faculty continue to face the possibility of layoffs, Messer said.

“We all want the college to survive,” Messer said. “We all want to maintain our accreditation. But that shouldn’t happen at the expense of our students’ education and the livelihood of our workers.”

City College is the largest community college in the state and serves over 90,000 students each year. But in the last three years, the state has reduced its funding by \$53 million. The College will face another immediate financial crisis if it cannot meet its target enrollment of 34,000 full-time students in the spring semester. If City College continues to enroll students at its current pace, it would lose \$5 million in state funding.

Board of Trustees President John Rizzo said the board hasn’t yet made any decisions about how to use the Prop. A funds. That money won’t start coming in until the next fiscal year, starting July 1. Rizzo said he would not support a plan to spend all Prop. A funds on the reserve, technology, facility maintenance and retiree benefits.

“The budget for next year hasn’t been determined,” Rizzo said. “It will be determined by talking with the employees. It will be collaborative.”

Yet the Board of Trustees has already approved a sweeping reorganization of the college. Starting in January, administrators must reapply for their jobs. While some current administrators will retain their jobs, new administrators will be brought in from outside City College, Kamer said.

The reorganization will reduce 61 departmental chairs to 17 or 18 positions, which will be consolidated into eight schools overseen by individual deans. The efficiency measure will save \$2 million a year, Kamer said.

But the current departmental chairs ensure the success of their individual programs, said Edgar Torres, chair of the Latin American and Latino Studies department. For example, Latin American studies is more interested in adding English as a second language courses than is African American studies. Under the new structure, however, the two programs would be overseen by the same person.

“Without the chairs, the programs will eventually die,” Torres said.

The passage last month of Prop. A, together with the statewide Prop. 30, Governor Jerry Brown’s tax revenue measure, was supposed to supply the financial life support needed to forestall devastating cuts to City College, Messer said.

“It feels at the moment that we are hardly better off than we were before we passed Prop. A and Prop. 30,” Messer said. “With Prop. A, we were trying to ensure we didn’t need to make these drastic decisions and we didn’t need to downsize the college long-term.”

Chris Jackson, a member of the Board of Trustees, called for public discussions over how to spend the Prop. A money, rather than talks behind closed doors in Interim Chancellor Thelma Scott-Skillman’s office.

Early Friday morning the board made a commitment to establish a citizens' oversight committee, a Prop. A requirement intended to ensure that the funds are used for voter-authorized purposes.

"There's a lot of interest in how that committee will be selected," said Torres. "If the board appoints their own people, like they have been doing, they will be forcing their way on where the money goes."

The oversight committee will not be empowered to make policy, Kamer said. Decisions on how to spend Prop. A funds will ultimately be made by the board.

Special trustee Robert Agrella can veto the board's decisions if he feels the actions won't support the recovery plan for the college.

"The people who barely lifted a finger to pass the parcel tax are now having their meetings without public input and trying to dictate how the parcel tax resources will be used," Jackson said. "It's highly unfair to the voters that invested faith in us."

Shanell Williams, president of the City College of San Francisco Associated Students Council, said that students, the union and the citizens of San Francisco should decide where Prop. A funds are spent. She said she doesn't trust an interim chancellor and special trustee who have no long-term connection to City College to do what is best for the college.

"They don't want to use these funds appropriately," Williams said. "We're going to try every avenue we can to not let them dismantle our school."