

The Orange County Register

Watchdog: Did officials know of building code violations before closing Orange Education Center? District spending \$21 million on repairs

By [KEEGAN KYLE](#) | Orange County Register

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Just a decade after a Santiago Canyon College building opened at a cost of \$27 million, district officials plan to spend nearly as much money fixing it to address state building code violations, safety concerns and other necessary renovations.

In December 2012, Rancho Santiago Community College District officials closed the building to classes and day-care services, citing concerns with its state certification. State architects never reviewed or approved the building's 2005 construction, an apparent violation of state law.

Architectural studies found classrooms exceeded occupancy limits. Signs didn't properly mark emergency exits. Water pipes and air ducts weren't supported to seismic standards. At least four required fire hydrants were missing.

Today, a \$21 million renovation is moving forward amid lawsuit threats and allegations that district leaders covered up the building's problems before a 2012 bond election. Voters approved the bond a month before the building was closed. District officials defend how they handled the building's closure, saying they acted as quickly as possible given the available information and have made changes in construction oversight to prevent similar lapses in the future.

Thousands of students attended free, noncredit classes at the building, known as the Orange Education Center, before it closed. Licensed day-care services also could serve up to 100 kids daily.

District officials and the center's architect, Irvine-based gkkworks, dispute whether the building required state certification when it was constructed. The district says the firm failed to follow state laws and is now liable for costs associated with gaining certification; gkkworks disagrees.

No lawsuit has been filed over the building's construction. However, district officials told the Register in a statement that they are prepared to file a lawsuit against gkkworks but are hopeful that an out-of-court settlement may be reached.

Without a settlement or insurance, funding to renovate the Orange Education Center will draw money from accounts that could otherwise pay for a wide array of needs at the district's two campuses, Santa Ana College and Santiago Canyon College.

The project is currently in the design phase, so it's unclear what the new building at 1465 N. Batavia St. in Orange would look like. But the changes will be dramatic. Nearly half the building is expected to be demolished to make way for more parking, according to district records.

Another factor in the cost is bringing the property up to current building codes for education facilities, a necessary step for state certification. After architectural firms evaluated the property in 2011 and 2013, they reported dozens of code violations and safety concerns to district officials.

Problems even extended to the day-care area. Curbs, walls and canopies by the outdoor playground were flagged as hazards in need of repair or replacement.

The Register obtained copies of the architectural reports and other district records about the center under state public records laws. District officials have previously released little information about the building and declined requests to be interviewed for this story.

In a written statement, district officials described their investigation of the building as “an evolution that spanned many months,” complicated by a new chancellor, staff retirements, changes in building codes and internal debate over state requirements.

Records show district officials were aware of the center’s lacking state certification by at least July 2010, when the district’s Board of Trustees authorized hiring an architectural firm to review the building’s compliance with building codes.

District officials said they promptly closed the building in December 2012 after experts confirmed that it was never reviewed and approved by state architects as required by law. However, district staff reached much of that same conclusion 21/2 years earlier, records show.

The center’s programs were relocated to the main Santiago Canyon College campus in Orange and rented space. District officials said they didn’t believe the building was unsafe at the time. Only after closing it were “safety concerns ... also promptly identified and acted upon,” they said.

“No entity could have done more to react to a situation not of its own making and to take steps to assure that a reoccurrence will not happen,” the district said in a written statement. “(The district) responded responsibly and swiftly to assess the scope and nature of the issue. At all times, the district acted with the safety of its students and community as its highest priority.”

At least one former trustee disagrees with that assertion, however. The district discussed the building in closed-door meetings amid a 2012 bond election and delayed shuttering it until after the election so they could “present it as a united front,” former trustee Dave Chapel said.

“I think withholding that from the public may not be criminal but certainly unethical,” Chapel said. “The concern wasn’t about student safety. The concern was about how to get out of this without being embarrassed.”

Chapel, who lost a re-election bid in November 2012, said he urged the district to publicly air the center’s problems months before its closure but was overruled.

District officials denied any impropriety.

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