

May 11, 2006  
Second of two editorials

When the Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District had \$207 million worth of construction to manage and priority lists from two campuses that stretched from here to the county line, it called in the experts.

Administrators weren't afraid to admit they knew about scholastics, not scaffolding. The district hired **Gafcon Inc.** of San Diego to help manage its massive building program.

"It was an astute decision by the district to bring in **Gafcon** from Day One," said Harvey Goodfriend, treasurer of the San Diego Taxpayers Association. "Just in managing the bidding alone, Gafcon saved the district its costs."

Goodfriend should know something about construction oversight. He has served on three oversight committees – La Mesa's for public safety facilities, La Mesa-Spring Valley School District's, and the community college district's. He is a believer in hiring an outside management firm with experience and resources.

Grossmont-Cuyamaca is not to be confused with an East County high school district with a similar name. Grossmont-Cuyamaca has no affiliation with the Grossmont Union High School District.

The two districts' construction approaches are like night and day. The high school district, Grossmont Union, went in-house, has lost its key executives, and has kept the public largely in the dark.

Meantime, Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District has received professional advice and support on everything, including how to set up its citizen oversight panel. Audits and financial information have been prompt, not delayed for months. Under retiring Chairman (and La Mesa Councilman) Ernie Ewin, the committee posted everything on a Web site for public review.

Grossmont-Cuyamaca reached out to the East County's many small subcontractors. It established a reputation for prompt payments, encouraging some firms usually reluctant to even consider public projects.

The outreach was to pay off as a statewide building boom sent skilled labor and material prices off the charts. Some types of steel, up 50 percent in nine months. Drywall, cement – obscene price increases if they could be purchased at all.

Bids came in substantially over cost estimates. Thanks to its outreach program, however, Grossmont-Cuyamaca received as many as 10 bids on a single project. The level of confidence was high that the bids were correct.

Grossmont-Cuyamaca is about halfway through its building program, financed by Proposition R, passed in 2002. Five major projects, six buildings in all, are rising out of the ground. Grossmont students can see the progress on the Digital Arts/Sculpture Complex and Science Lab. Cuyamaca students will be served in the near future by the Science and Technology Mall, the Communication Arts Building and new Student Center.

Still, the community college district has an unfilled wish list and wishes that a statewide education bond issue passes in the fall. A parking structure at Grossmont College, possibly a \$28 million item, isn't going to happen.

But student life is improving for the 26,000 the district serves. That's because Grossmont-Cuyamaca has been transparent at every stage, was willing to admit it wasn't in the construction business, and not afraid to call in the experts.

