

## Projects need more study time

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Ambition has gotten the better of oversight at the Los Angeles Community College District.

A bank of solar panels installed at Harbor College in Wilmington was envisioned as part of a plan to take the entire Los Angeles Community College District "off the grid." If only officials could get them turned on.

Here's what happened, as reported in the Daily Breeze on Sunday: A division of Chevron came to Harbor College in Wilmington and installed solar panels above two campus parking lots. Chevron would continue to own the equipment and sell the energy to the college for six years, after which time the college would have bought the equipment. The solar panels would greatly reduce the campus's energy costs.

But there was a glitch in that operational circuit. The district didn't know that the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power would not permit the college to buy energy from a third party. Chevron, in turn, wanted to be paid for the panels' construction, and the district didn't have the money tapped to cover the \$25 million bill.

While the president of the LACCD's Board of Trustees called the funding situation a "big screw-up," the executive director of planning

and development, Larry Eisenberg, framed it as more of a growing pain for the district and the technology. "It would be nice if there had been a road map," he said, "but somebody had to go first. In the process of going first, you wind up exploring a fair number of dead ends."

Granted, but coming up against a rule that a third party could not sell electricity to the college shouldn't have been one of those roadblocks. Before embarking on such an ambitious plan with an outside partner, approval from the DWP should have been sought.

More scrutiny is coming, and the new Office of the Inspector General approved by trustees in March is a good start. The office will be charged with investigating allegations of fraud and wrongdoing connected to the \$6 billion bond-funded BuildLACCD construction initiative, no doubt providing important information to correct past wrongs and establish rules to prevent future abuses.

However, all of that will be based on looking back. The solar-panel stalemate shows that the district needs more than hindsight. Projects and proposals need to be vetted by an independent office - or perhaps an expansion of the new Inspector General's Office - before they are carried out, or bond money is promised, let alone spent.

The solar panels aren't the only misstep that

makes that clear. Consider The Green Hive. Two beach city residents spent the past two years developing the eco-friendly building resource center and designing office space slated for it on LACCD property. But the promise of that space and support fell through after Eisenberg, who had worked with The Green Hive business partners, learned that the community college district could not provide district space to or use voter-approved bond money to fund a for-profit venture. What's more, the board of trustees never approved the project in the first place.

Speaking of the board, the district also needs to examine (and likely increase) the resources available to those trustees. That's important for any proposal, but particularly those multimillion-dollar building plans.

"I didn't know we were approving projects without having the money," board President Mona Field said of the solar panels. Explaining that trustees have no staff to help them analyze and understand the proposals, Field said trustees do ask questions but usually vote the way that district officials recommend, which begs: Why have a board to vote at all? The trustees provide another, much-needed layer of oversight, but that check is pointless without the resources to independently scrutinize the proposals.

Throughout all these events, we hope LACCD has been taking notes for what we hope is a thorough and forward-looking "road map." On the solar-panel front, a pending deal with Citigroup will pay Chevron for the work and allow the college to lease the equipment from

the bank until it can buy it outright. But the nine-campus district isn't done with BuildLACCD yet - work at Harbor College alone is estimated at about \$470million - and we'd hate to see the lessons so painfully learned thus far go to waste.

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