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College of Southern Idaho board shakes up old ways

By Ben Botkin - Times-News writer

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In an effort to increase the public's trust, the College of Southern Idaho has changed the way it selects who carries out its next multimillion-dollar campus building project.

The change represents an ideological shift, and an admission that the college's old way of business wasn't always the best way.

But last week's 3-2 vote by school trustees to make that change was anything but a quick decision. It followed more than a year of criticism and the November ouster of two longtime trustees.

The college now shifts away from a selection process that picks a team of an architect and contractor based on their qualifications to carry out a project. Instead, CSI will move to a process in which qualified contractors compete based on the prices they offer.

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Trustees who backed the change said it was needed to increase transparency in the college's selection process, not because of problems with the quality of past building projects.

"We promised there would be transparency, that the processes would be fair and above-board, and we worked really hard to do that," said Karl Kleinkopf, who along with Bob Keegan was elected as trustee in November.

The past

Questions about the college's selection process and transparency first emerged in June 2009.

At the time, retired contractor Byrd Golay grilled trustees during one of their meetings about why Twin Falls-based construction firm Starr Corp. was the sole company to repeatedly land CSI's major construction projects.

Trustees had unanimously voted to hire Starr to construct a \$7 million home for CSI's wind energy program, provided that the college received a federal stimulus grant from the Economic Development Administration.

Trustees vehemently defended the selection process as proper, denying allegations that Starr received preferential treatment because its retired president, Glenn Arrington, sat on the CSI Foundation's board, a separate nonprofit fundraising arm of the college.

A Times-News investigation revealed in August 2009 that the college began consulting with Starr and its architecture firm, CTA, for the grant application in December 2008, well before competition for the project was opened to other firms.

In their grant application, authored a month before the college advertised for proposals, CSI officials stated that the “Starr/CTA-CSI design-build team has a successful track record” that “reinforced our preference for design build with these partners.”

Nine companies other than Starr applied for the job. Several later said that they wouldn’t have bothered if the college had been upfront about Starr’s prior involvement.

CSI, for its part, called the wording in the application an “error,” saying it wasn’t intended to undermine the competitive process.

Still, when the EDA reviewed CSI’s application, project officer JoAn Smith told the college to remove the passage that raised eyebrows.

“Delete all reference to Starr-CTA-CSI design-build team,” she wrote in a June 9, 2010, email to the college.

The decision

The EDA awarded CSI a \$4.4 million grant in January for the college’s proposed Applied Energy and Innovation Center. Since the grant came during a new funding cycle, CSI must again seek bid proposals for the project.

During the gap between when it first applied for the grant and its receipt, CSI’s board underwent its most significant shift ever with November’s election.

Voters ousted two trustees — then-Chairman LeRoy Craig and Charles Lehrman, both on the board since 1974.

That set the stage for last week’s vote to change CSI’s building process for the project, with new trustees Kleinkopf and Keegan joining Allan Frost to pass it.

In response to the board's shift, but before last week's vote, Mike Mason, CSI's vice president of administration, suggested the selection process also include a different team of overseers.

Mason, who has previously been a member of CSI's selection teams, admitted a past "bias" and suggested putting fewer college employees on selection committees.

"Past teams have been made up of college staff members who have a vested interest in the outcome of the project," Mason wrote in a March 17 memo. "There is also a bias toward firms that have successfully completed projects for the college in the past."

Board Chairman Thad Scholes, a trustee since 1981, says that's understandable. He voted against the change, along with Trustee Donna Brizee.

Scholes said the college has had "really good luck" with its past process. He said he hadn't heard any complaints about it until after Kleinkopf and Keegan took office.

He took Mason's comment about "bias" in stride.

"He says, 'I probably am biased. I've had such good luck,'" Scholes said. "That's just sort of built in when you've had good luck."

The future

There's still work ahead for CSI before its new building goes up across from Starr's most recent campus project — the \$21 million Health Sciences and Human Services Building.

CSI President Jerry Beck said the board had "good deliberations" about its recent decision, adding that the next question will be whether the project's delay will lead to other costs.

Starr Corp. President Michael Arrington said the change won't prevent him from continuing to seek work at CSI. He said the company has experience elsewhere with the college's new selection process.

And as he continues to grow into his new role, Keegan will be involved in the six-member selection team.

"I'm looking forward to it," he said. "I like building things."

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