

Editorial—College of Marin needs to reverse enrollment slide

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College of Marin's construction and enrollment don't seem to be heading in the same direction.

While new buildings have been going up around the Kentfield and Indian Valley campuses — thanks to voters' 2004 approval of a \$249.5 million capital bond program — enrollment has been sliding.

Last fall, enrollment stood at 5,737 credit students. That's down nearly 2,000 students since 2010 and less than half the college's student body in 1995.

In voting for the 2004 bond measure, Marin voters put a top priority in improving, modernizing and repairing their community college. Deferred maintenance had taken its toll on the campuses.

While the campuses were being rebuilt, it was hoped enrollment would climb.

COM has a tough job attracting local high school graduates, many of whom have their sights set on four-year colleges and universities. But COM can provide these students with the same freshman and sophomore year classes, usually in smaller classrooms, at a fraction of the cost, close to home and a strong academic path to junior and senior years.

As college tuitions have skyrocketed, community colleges have played a bigger role.

But COM's enrollment is still short of its potential, even though more of its students are not university-bound. Many are seeking two-year degrees, often on a specific professional-training track. Some are returning to college to prepare themselves for new careers.

Part of its drop in recent years was the state's elimination of repeat classes, in which students would re-enroll in the same classes, such as orchestra or art.

District officials also say that its own rising tuition and changes in financial aid also have taken a bite out of enrollment.

On top of that, students living in Marinwood and north face gridlock on Highway 101 to get to morning classes in Kentfield. Many go, instead, north, to the Petaluma campus of Santa Rosa Junior College.

These challenges, however, mean COM has to work harder to make sure potential students know of the fine academic opportunities the college provides.

In recent years, COM has focused on strengthening the college's once-idle relationship with local high schools, making sure students know about the affordable and quality offerings at COM. Building those bridges should pay off for students and the college. So should the growing enrollment in Marin elementary and high schools.

Re-growing and stabilizing COM's enrollment should be a top public priority for the college, its leadership and its elected trustees.