

Without lease renewal, DACC to close Mesquite Neighborhood Learning Center

LAS CRUCES >> Officials at Doña Ana Community College are working to develop a plan to accommodate more than 200 students who will be affected when the Mesquite Neighborhood Learning Center, 890. Tornillo St., closes at the end of the semester.

The city owns the building that houses the learning center, and last week, DACC announced that the school's lease with the city would not be extended beyond May 30.

The learning center opened in 2001 and was initially funded through state and federal grants. It primarily serves low-income students, helping them to further their education and prepare for careers. It also offers developmental courses and workshops on college preparation and work-readiness skills.

DACC officials say the learning center would cease operations when the current semester ends on May 8.

Eddie Binder, director of public relations and development for DACC, said school officials were caught off guard to learn last month that the lease would be terminated.

"It came as a surprise," Binder said Wednesday. "The students, in particular, are very concerned."

Binder said the learning center serves about 237 students in DACC's Adult Basic Education program, which offers ESL classes and preparation for GED exams. An additional 25 students are currently taking developmental credit courses at the center, he said.

"Right now, we're meeting with students and exploring options to meet their educational needs," Binder said.

This week, officials began meeting with students at the learning to discuss options for completing their education. On Wednesday, officials, including DACC's president, Renay Scott, met with a group of students. "We want to get a better sense of how to meet the students' needs," Binder said. Officials also plan to meet with students next week.

Under one option, DACC would consider moving the learning center's operations to the school's Workforce Center on East Nevada Street, but Binder said that has not been finalized.

"We're on tight schedule, but we're hoping for a resolution soon," said Binder, who expects Scott to make an official announcement within the coming weeks.

Binder said students have voiced disappointment at the center's closure. "They're disappointed because there's going to be change, and that will be difficult for some," he said.

On Wednesday, DACC student Kirna Flores, 35, said she was unhappy to learn that the center was closing at the end of the semester.

"We're all very sad," said Flores, a native of Chihuahua, Mexico, who has lived in Las Cruces for about 10 years.

Flores said she has been taking classes at the learning center for about four years. She said she was able to earn a GED two years ago through support from the center.

"I've learned so much here, and my heart belongs here," Flores, who is currently pursuing an associate degree at DACC. "The teachers here are great and always help us."

Margarita C. Trejo, who messaged the Sun-News' Facebook page, called the learning center "a great benefit to our community."

Trejo's message also said, "In (the) time that I have been attending (the) Mesquite Neighborhood Learning Center it has not only taught me educationally, it has also taught me many other skills."

In news release issued this week, city officials outlined plans to house part of a new "youth campus" at the North Tornillo Street building after DACC vacates the premises.

The city's Juvenile Citation Program and its after-school program will operate out of the former learning center building, 890. Tornillo St., as one-half of the new youth campus, officials said in the release. The other half of the campus, A. Fielder Memorial Safe Haven, which currently operates the "Weed & Seed" program, will be housed in a building at 906 N. Tornillo St.

The Juvenile Citation Program is currently housed at the old City Hall building, 200 N. Church St. In the coming weeks, staff will begin to relocate to the new facility, the release said. The program is expected to completely vacate the old City Hall building by July 1.

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