

Editorial: Clean up dysfunctional Peralta district, elect Heyman

College system plagued by reckless bond borrowing, fiscal mismanagement, insolvency risk, misbehaving trustees ...

By [EAST BAY TIMES EDITORIAL](#) |

PUBLISHED: October 16, 2020 at 5:10 a.m. | UPDATED: October 16, 2020 at 5:36 a.m.

Few public agencies are as dysfunctional as the Peralta Community College District. Few are as desperately in need of change.

Unfortunately, only one of the four board members whose terms are ending this year faces a reelection challenge. The good news is that trustee is Bill Withrow, one of the more problematic board members.



This is an opportunity for voters in Area 1, which includes Alameda and a sliver of Oakland along the estuary, to get rid of Withrow, who has been on the board since 2004 and, until this year, hadn't had an opponent when he sought reelection. Voters should replace him with Jeff Heyman, the former spokesman for the district who understands the depths of the district's problems.

The district — which includes Berkeley City College, the College of Alameda, Laney College and Merritt College — has been plagued by scandals for more than a decade, dating back to the reign of [Chancellor Elihu Harris](#), the former Oakland mayor and state assemblyman who was never qualified to lead a community college district.

He [awarded contracts](#) to his business partner, handed out salary raises to his friends and ran up extravagant charges on his district credit card — all while the district's financial system deteriorated. Meanwhile, other big fiscal problems were taking root. One was an irresponsible [bond borrowing scheme](#) launched before the Great Recession to cover the cost of workers' retirement health benefits. The resulting debt, \$235 million as of two years ago, is more than was originally borrowed and has left the district with future decades of rising loan payments that will eat up education funds.

More recently, a 2019 [financial analysis](#) of the district found it was at high [risk of insolvency](#), with bloated administration, a culture of favoritism, lack of accountability and employees questioning the ethics of district leadership.

Soon after the report came out, the district hired a new chancellor, Regina Stanback Stroud, who quit after nine months, [penning a scathing critique](#) of the board on her way out. The district is about to launch a nationwide search for her replacement.

The critique accused the board of ineffective governance, hostile conduct toward others and each other, violations of closed session confidentiality and the state's open-meeting law, interference in investigations of complaints against board members, collusion with the unions against the interest of the district and undermining the collective bargaining negotiation process. And that's just half of it.

But to hear Withrow tell it, things are just fine at Peralta. He even tried to censure another board member who said otherwise, claiming he lacked [free speech rights](#) to criticize the district. Withrow has been on the board and in the thick of all the poor financial decisions for more than 15 years. It's time for him to go.



Fortunately, his opponent understands things are not hunky dory. It's time for change. Vote for Heyman.



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