Hancock trustees tour public safety complex

Abel Gomez, project manager for the public safety training complex at Hancock College’s Lompoc Valley Center, talks with members of the Board of Trustees, college administrators and members of the media about a burn building that will be used to simulate house fires during a tour of the facility Tuesday.

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Abel Gomez's big truck swayed into a curve and sprinted up to 60 mph, then 70, as the 1.4-mile paved loop straightened.

Just cruising speed, really, on the Emergency Vehicle Operator Course at the 58-acre public safety training complex at Hancock College's Lompoc Valley Center.

"It's rated for 110," said Gomez, project manager for Kitchell, construction management firm for the $37.9 million complex scheduled for completion in fall 2013.

The complex will be a regional training site for public safety officers — police, firefighters, and emergency response workers — seeking certification and recertification.

Steel skeletons rising around him, Gomez led Hancock trustees and school officials, including Interim President Elizabeth Miller, Tuesday afternoon on a tour of the project.

In a caravan of trucks and wearing construction hats, they visited the 37,000-square-foot administration building, a huge vehicle storage building, a six-story fire tower, a high-temperature burn building, a 100-yard drive-through shooting range — all shells sitting in the muddy field southwest of the campus.

At a trench rescue area, Gomez explained how one end could be filled with enough water to submerge a vehicle with a "body" for rescue training. The area included a 3-foot tunnel for rescue workers to crawl through in total darkness to the fire tower, Gomez said.

Trustees Henry Grennan and Tim Bennett, of Santa Maria, asked whether the water in the trench rescue area — thousands of gallons would be used for training sessions — would be reclaimed and were told it would not.

Still, they found the project impressive.

"I'm extremely impressed with the whole setup," said Bennett. "I've seen the drawings for the last two years. It will be exciting to share it with the public.

"This is a Cadillac. This is more modern than any other."

Trustee Bernard Jones, of Lompoc, said the complex will bring a much-needed economic boost to the community, with visitors staying at hotels, eating at restaurants and shopping.

"When you come for training, you stay for a week or two. It's good for Lompoc," Jones said.

Luis Sanchez, associate superintendent/vice president of academic affairs at Hancock, said school officials are working with public safety officials to prepare a "sustainability plan" or business plan to take advantage of the project's economic potential.

The complex is being funded by Measure I, the $180 million general obligation bond approved by Hancock district voters in 2006.

Gomez, who moved to Lompoc from Downey in Southern California to oversee the construction, said he hopes to stay after the project.

"I don't want to go back to that traffic," he said. "This town has a lot of potential."

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