Measure I progress on fire tech program

One of Hancock College's most anticipated Measure I-funded projects is undoubtedly the Public Safety Training Complex at the Lompoc Valley Center.

The $46.2 million, 80-acre complex will begin construction this year and is expected to be completed in 2013. It is a large and intricate project that I am providing a series of three commentaries detailing all of its features.

In my first piece, I told you about some of the great, new features that will be used by our police academy students and instructors, including a one-mile emergency vehicle operations course, a scenario village, shooting range, fitness track, obstacle course and more.

In this report, I am focusing on our fire academy and fire technology programs and the aspects of the new complex that are designed to serve their needs.

The complex incorporates some amazing, state-of-the-art applications. Most impressive, perhaps, is the facility's six-story fire tower and Class-A "burn building."

The tower design incorporates multiple facades found in high-rise apartments, office buildings and mixed-use buildings. Once inside the building, students will be exposed to as many unexpected scenarios as can occur in the field. Computer-controlled props will fill the hallways with fire at the touch of a button, and a simulated kitchen features stoves that catch fire and machines that generate smoke.

The tower will use an interactive sound system that projects sounds of breaking windows, collapsing floors, screams and more. There is also a simulated jail inside the fire tower that can be used in training exercises for both the fire and police academies.

The burn building will also give the fire academy instructors more opportunities to train students in real-life situations. Completely customizable, it is designed to act as a single-story residence, but with walls and hallways that can be reconfigured at will. Instructors will set actual fires within the building using combustible materials that will create the heat and smoke firefighters must learn to conquer on the job. It is also equipped with a roof that can be destroyed and replaced multiple times, allowing fire training students to ventilate the house as they would during a real-life situation.

One other addition that hasn't received much fanfare, but that the instructors believe is critical, is a confined-space rescue area. Consisting of a series of tunnels beginning beneath the fire tower, the confined space rescue prop includes enclosed tunnels, open-air tunnels and a series of trenches.

The prop will allow the complex to be a certified trench rescue-training site, an excellent resource for statewide training needs. The confined-space rescue area also has a concrete pool that fills with water, enabling the instructors to sink an actual car and practice water rescues.

Inside the new 51,197-square-foot building, the fire training resources include classrooms, a fire technology lab and a specially outfitted environmental technology lab that will serve as a practice space for hazardous materials clean-up and certification.

It is our goal to build a facility that will serve the current and future needs of our students. As with the opportunities for training and certification that will be available to local and statewide police departments at the new complex, we anticipate that Central Coast fire departments and firefighters from throughout the state will want to take advantage of the training opportunities at the state-of-the-art Public Safety Training Complex. We anticipate the new facility will be the go-to place for fire and rescue training in California.

Next time, I will detail the many ways the emergency medical services program at Hancock College will benefit from the new Public Safety Training Complex.

José M. Ortiz is superintendent/president of Allan Hancock College.