Confrontational superintendent departs with $100,000 severance package from outgoing governing board

By Sean Campbell and Lyndsay Winkley
Senior Staff Writer and Campus Editor

Southwestern College Superintendent Raj K. Chopra resigned about a month after two members of the college’s governing board majority resoundly lost to faculty union-backed candidates. He received a $102,000 severance equivalent to six months salary.

While helping to secure a $389 million construction bond and bringing a hard-nosed, conservative budgeting style to the college, he also ignited a three-year power struggle at SWC, including problems in shared governance, financial transparency and the First Amendment.

“I believe some important objectives have been achieved,” Chopra said in a statement issued by college spokesman Chris Bender.

“The college, in spite of unprecedented financial problems at the state level, remains in good financial standing. With the accreditation visit completed this month, construction of the new facilities on the corner lot, the central HVAC and Field House well underway, and Proposition AA projects almost completed, it is the right time.”

SWC General Counsel Jon Pearl said California allows a maximum of 18 months severance pay and Chopra accepted six months, which equates to $102,000. He said the district and Chopra made a clean break.

“It’s a settlement agreement,” Pearl said. “So (the) relationship is done and the parties are each going their own ways.”

Chopra is considered one of the most controversial superintendents in SWC’s 50-year history. While he claims he helped to keep the college afloat during one of the country’s worst recessions, his heavy-handed management style left a wake of distrust between SWC employees and administration.

Some said he made hard decisions and set the college up for success in the future, others said he dismantled SWC and left the college in a state of rubble and despair that will take years to fix.

Chopra’s Rise: From K-12 to College

Chopra began at the college August 2007 after leaving the Phoenix Unified High School District in a similar fashion. He butted heads with the teachers union, filed charges against one of the district’s governing board members after a verbal altercation and was accused of harassing a high school student body president.

The faculty campaigned against the board majority that supported him and won.

Weeks later he resigned to come to SWC. He had been at PUHSD for about six years but his previous job with a Pennsylvania school district lasted only two years, from 1998 to 2000, and ended in a volatile manner with a disagreement with the district’s governing board.

His contract with SWC, which was worth about $1 million in salary, was due to end June 2012.

Outgoing board members Jorge Dominguez and Yolanda Salcido said they supported Chopra during their re-election campaign. Both lost badly at the November polls to Tim Nader and Norma Hernandez. They were eligible to take their seats Dec. 1, but indicated they will wait until the Dec. 8 board meeting.

According to Chopra’s statement, “This will permit the new governing board—which will be seated next month—to select a new leader to help the college build for ongoing success.”

Chopra came to the college with no former

A stormy tenure ends

A timeline of Raj K. Chopra’s stint as SWC superintendent from August 2007 to November 2010

Compiled by Sean Campbell

Designed by Joseph Young

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