Green construction for Watsonville project proves too expensive for Cabrillo

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APTOS — The cost to build the planned Green Technology Center for Cabrillo College in Watsonville is $1 million more than college officials estimated when they went looking for a contractor, which is forcing the college to shave costs off the project they had hoped would achieve a LEED platinum level.

Nine bids for the 14,000-square-foot student technology center were opened Thursday, with the lowest bid of $6 million coming from Dilbeck and Sons of Salinas.

Cabrillo board members said at their meeting Monday night that the extra $1 million is more than the community college can afford, and alternatives must be looked at to bring the construction price back down near the original estimate of $5 million.

“We don’t have a million dollars in our construction budget,” Cabrillo President Brian King said. “We’re working hard to find savings with the low bidder.”

Cabrillo College and Watsonville officials closed escrow on the purchase of the Old Union Street Watsonville Library site in July 2008. The library, which is now housed in the city’s new Civic Plaza on Main Street, has since been demolished and the land has been prepared for construction of the Green Technology Center that will educate students on the practices of green building.

The technology center’s architect, Peter Kasavan of Salinas, said the higher than expected cost is largely due to the expensive recyclable materials required and risk involved in constructing a LEED platinum building — a level of green building he called extremely rare.

“There is a lot of liability with it and no margin of error,” Kasavan said. “There are a number of requirements by the general contractor in terms of record keeping, special handling and a special commissioning after its finished by a third party.”

LEED is still new, which makes it exciting and popular. We’ll keep working at it to make this work,” he said.

Board members also acknowledged they had underestimated the competitive environment among contractors looking for work. Several said the downturn in the economy led them to believe the technology center could be constructed at their projected $5.1 million.

The issue will be brought back to either the October or November board meeting for action.

In other actions Monday, the board received a budget update by Vice President of Administrative Services Victoria Lewis.

The community college, which has cut $5.8 million since 2008, is looking to slash another $2.4 million for the 2011-12 school year, Lewis said.

Cabrillo is currently dipping into reserves to bridge a $1.9 million gap in the wake of reduced state funding for education and the additional strain of the Legislature not yet passing a budget for the current fiscal year.

The projected deficit for 2013 is $5.4 million, Lewis said.

About 87 percent of the college’s budget is taken up by salaries and benefits, she said.

“We have to look at further cost containment. There are no good choices,” board President Gary Reece said. “There are no choices any of us would make if we had it another way.”