

## VVC president to retire

By Steve Hunt  
Editor

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VICTORVILLE — Victor Valley College President/Superintendent Dr. Roger Wagner, who turned around a community college in dire financial straits and facing possible loss of accreditation, told the Board of Trustees last week that he will retire on Jan. 1.

Wagner's resignation will be an action item at Tuesday's regular board meeting. His contract would have expired next summer.

In a letter emailed to VVC staff on Friday night, Wagner, 66, said his decision did not come easily, but he felt it was the right one.

"We have accomplished so much over the past four years ... you should be very proud of your accomplishments," he wrote. "Some amazing things have happened much to your hard work and dedication. For this, I owe each of you a great deal of gratitude."

Victor Valley College Board of Trustees President Marianne Tortorici said she holds Wagner in the highest regard.

"During my 40 years in higher education, I've interacted with about 20 different presidents," she said. "I can say that of those 20 presidents, Dr. Wagner is one of the best leaders with which I've had the pleasure to work. I will miss him and wish him the best in his future.

"As you can imagine, everyone I've spoken to has mixed emotions about Dr. Wagner's resignation. On the one hand, we are all saddened by Dr. Wagner's decision to resign from the college. Yet, we are also happy that he has the opportunity to retire to enjoy his family and life."

VVC Trustee Joseph W. Brady also had high praise for Wagner.

"Dr. Wagner is just a great man, leader and in my personal and professional opinion the greatest leader we have had at VVC in the last 40 years," Brady said.

Trustee John Pinkerton admitted he was surprised when Roger informed the Board of his decision.

"We were all hoping we had a few more years with this man," he said. "He's a straight shooter. That's that Midwestern type quality. He's real humble. He gives credit out everywhere. He built one success upon another. My grandfather always told me no one is indispensable. But there are people who are hard to replace and Roger is one of them."

In a conversation with the Daily Press on Saturday morning, Wagner said he just felt the time was right to retire.

"There was no one single thing as much as it was just time to retire," he said. "I've worked full time since I was 17 years old. I live in Sun City (retirement community in Apple Valley) and I watch my neighbors go play golf when I'm putting on a suit and going to work every day."

Wagner said he chose to announce his retirement now in order to allow the Board of Trustees to begin to search and select the college's next superintendent/president with no gap in leadership. He noted when he was hired he was "the ninth president in 12 years" and he didn't want VVC to have to hire an interim president if at all possible.

"I knew when I left it was going to be with a minimum of six months (notice)," he said. "You don't need to hire an interim president."

When Wagner was hired four years ago, VVC was in serious trouble.

"I was appointed on Feb. 1, 2011 and it was not long after that I could clearly tell that VVC was like a ship without a captain," Brady said. "It had no leadership, we had serious financial and accreditation issues. We had a \$3.5 million dollar structural deficit. We spent money without accountability and without a true leader. We had what I termed a toxic atmosphere and a lack of unification by our employee partners. It took time to figure out what the issues were and to communicate them to our then leadership. It fell on deaf ears until Dr. Wagner showed up."

Tortorici agreed Wagner faced daunting challenges when he was hired, but quickly overcame them.

"When Dr. Wagner arrived at VVC, the college was having trouble balancing the budget, it was on probation from the accrediting agency, the unions were dissatisfied with the administration and the board lacked continuity and direction," Tortorici said. "Within a year Dr. Wagner was able to create a balanced budget, work with faculty/staff to remove the college from probation, negotiate with the unions to obtain multi-year contracts as well as gain their trust and work to have the board function in a civil and healthy manner."

"Dr. Wagner also reached out to the community and developed new partnerships with industry and the local high schools. His competency, thoughtfulness and sense of humor were the tools that resulted in the college campus and community respecting and loving him."

Wagner credited the Board for giving him free rein to make quick changes.

"From Day One I had the full support of the board," Wagner said. "And that's what I needed. The fact they gave me the full authority to do what I needed to do is probably why we were able to do so many things."

"The climate now is a complete turnaround. The budget is better than when I got here. Accreditation is off our back. Probably what we need now is somebody to come in and take it to that next, higher level."

Wagner, a former police officer, spent the past 24 years in education. Before VVC, he served as president at Copper Mountain College in Joshua Tree and Dean of Career and Vocational Education at Crowder College in Neosho, Missouri.

He is a believer in servant leadership and Trustee Brandon Wood said that was just part of the impressive package Wagner brought to the college and the job.

"Roger has done a amazing job at VVC," Wood said. "I think the biggest impact he's made has been to the campus climate. He's a leader that's a pleasure to follow, and his servant leadership style has been well received. When Roger arrived, there was a lot of hostility on campus and distrust of the leadership; Roger changed all that. He created an environment of teamwork, cooperation and trust; he did an excellent job of first gaining everyone's trust and then bringing our entire campus together."

Wagner said he sees nothing but good ahead for VVC, and in his letter to staff encouraged everyone to continue working hard to improve the college and make it even better.

"It's a great school, a great college," he said. "It's been a wonderful way to end a career."