

Facility groups push for \$7b school construction bond in 2012

By Allen Young

Tuesday, August 9, 2011

School construction groups are organizing support for legislation that would place a \$7 billion school construction bond before voters in Nov. 2012.

The campaign will center on the growing need to repair deteriorating school buildings and also upgrade them to meet earthquake safety standards and career training needs.

But concern over public debt is at an all-time high and critics are already raising concerns about the measure that would reduce general fund spending by an estimated \$500 million each year because of new debt service.

“We hope that we’ll be able to have our message accepted that this is not new debt in the same way as borrowing money to pay for operational costs,” said David Walrath, a consultant for the Coalition for Adequate School Housing, a Sacramento-based association promoting the campaign.

“We believe it is an investment that will improve school facilities,” he said. “It will create jobs. It addresses neighborhood needs in local communities for modernized schools or new schools.”

According to a June poll commissioned by C.A.S.H, a large majority – 63 percent of likely voters – said they would support a 2012 school bond. That’s up from 56 percent of likely voters who approved of the idea in a 2009 survey.

The poll by Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz and Associates was conducted through phone interviews with 800 individuals who said they would likely vote in the Nov. 2012 presidential election. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

Curiously, the respondents favored a \$7 billion bond over a \$5 billion bond. As the poll suggests, voters wish to restore cuts to education but don’t appear to understand that school construction mostly draws from a different funding source than other areas of public education – a fact that may bode well for bond supporters.

There will be significant challenges, however. The qualifying legislation requires support by two-thirds of the Legislature, and Republicans have so far been adverse to the idea.

“Anything that takes money away from essential services – which is what a bond like this does – there’s less money in the general fund to actually fund education, transportation, health care, parks and recreation,” said Kris Vosburgh, executive director of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, a conservative anti-tax group.

Moreover, Gov. Jerry Brown has made reducing the state’s “wall of debt” a primary focus in his administration as well as the argument in favor of tax extensions he made to lawmakers and voters earlier this year. Given that position, there’s a sense that Brown’s endorsement of a school construction bond would be unlikely.

Tom Torlakson, the superintendent of public instruction, however, said he will try to organize influential education groups to make the case to both the governor and the public.

"I'll use my position as superintendent to fight for this – advocate as strongly as possible to build a coalition," he said in an interview.

Torlakson said he hopes that the coalition will include "our great teachers, the CTA, the classified employees, and school board members and superintendents. And I believe the business community will see this as smart," he said.

Torlakson added that he is also seeking an additional tax or revenue component on the 2012 ballot to help pay off the bond and also restore other school cuts.

A spokeswoman for the California Teachers Association said the union will decide sometime this fall whether or not they wish to support the bond.

About \$4 billion in bonds remain in the School Facility Program, or 11 percent of the \$35.4 billion in statewide school facility bonds that voters have approved over four separate elections beginning in 1998.

Most recently, Proposition 1D, the 2006 measure that directed \$7.3 billion for K-12 facilities, directed \$1.9 billion for new construction, \$3.3 billion for modernization, \$500 million for career technical education, \$500 million for charter schools, and \$100 million to schools built with "high performance" or environmentally-sound materials.

There are now \$2.5 billion in total bonds remaining in Proposition 1D. Facility interests expect those remaining construction bonds to be sold and issued to districts over the next couple years.

Since the passage of Proposition 1D, lawmakers have run a bill every legislative session to place another school construction bond on the statewide ballot.

More recently, Assemblywoman Julia Brownley, D-Santa Monica, chair of the Assembly Education Committee, has had to set aside legislation that would have authorized a statewide school bond every year since 2009 because of the fiscal crisis.

Her latest vehicle, AB 331, is still set to be taken up again in January.

According to officials at the California Department of Education, school buildings are deteriorating at a time when educators are demanding more complex learning environments.

Growing class sizes brought on by budget cuts and a rising interest in career technical education are the two main drivers for the need of new types of learning spaces, CDE officials said.

Additionally, routine facility maintenance has languished in recent years with the onset of categorical flexibility, which allows districts to spend previously restricted facility money on general fund needs. This has resulted in rising costs for repairs that would have otherwise been relatively inexpensive if addressed at the onset.

"I believe we need to look at modernization more deeply," said Kathleen Moore, director of the school facilities and planning division of the CDE.

"We've done modernization for new systems and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliance and fire safety, but we've never had the dollars to do educational modernizing, or to bring food services areas into modern practice. There will be a continued need for emphasis there," she said.