

## Obama jobs bill could be good news for school repair budgets

By Tom Chorneau

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Saddled with both low approval rating and high unemployment numbers, the Obama administration hinted last week that the president would soon release a new jobs program – one with school construction as a centerpiece.

Insiders say the plan is taken largely from a proposal put together by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund that would provide as much as \$50 billion for school districts nationally for deferred maintenance and energy-saving projects.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund, a D.C.-based nonprofit that advocates in support of urban school districts, argues that the average school building in the U.S. is now 40 years old and that the backlog of deferred maintenance – much of it rung up in the past five years – is close to \$270 billion.

They note that for every one billion dollars in construction spending as many as 10,000 jobs are created.

While the idea might seem unlikely given the new focus of Congress on cutting federal spending, some pols say the plan could attract both Democrats and Republicans if coupled with deficit reduction action further in the future.

If so, a big piece of the pie could be coming to California, where there is a lot of need.

“We have ten thousand existing schools in varying age and condition,” said Kathleen Moore, director of school facilities for the California Department of Education. “A federal investment in school facilities would be very welcomed. There was a similar program back in the early-2000s and it proved very successful here in California.”

As proposed, funding would be distributed to districts using an existing federal formula – probably the Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which already provides support to a large majority of schools nationally.

California, like many states, has given local educational agencies relief from keeping up with mandated school repairs as they struggle to deal with the great recession. In fact, the June budget agreement will continue categorical flexibility through 2014-15, which includes the use of deferred maintenance dollars.

But there’s a growing list of repairs that facility planners say can lead to energy inefficiencies and safety issues – including drinking water problems, water and mold damage, poor air quality, inadequate fire alarms and fire safety, and compromised building security.

School construction groups in California have already begun a lobbying effort aimed at getting the Legislature to place a \$7 billion school construction bond before voters in 2012.

A five-year needs assessment made by the Office of Public School Construction in 2009 placed the demand in California- then- at \$11.3 billion – about \$7.8 billion in new construction and another \$3.5 billion in modernization projects.

Officials at OPSC said Monday that analysis has not been updated, but speculated the need has only increased.

Among the work that would be allowed under the plan from 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund is:

- improving air quality and thermal comfort with improvements to heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems;
- stopping interior damage, including mold, and reducing energy costs with roof replacement and repair;
- supporting technology, mechanical systems, and modern use of electricity with an electrical system modernization;
- reducing water consumption, eliminating lead in water, meeting ADA requirements with bathroom and plumbing upgrades;
- eliminating allergy and asthma triggers, making sure asbestos is contained or eliminated, and creating inviting classroom and school environments with plaster repair and painting;
- saving energy and increasing daylight with window replacement;
- improving the school grounds with improvements to outdoor learning and play areas, storm water management, landscaping, and environmental cleanup, when necessary;
- reducing ongoing heating costs with energy-efficient boiler replacement;
- installing solar panels, wind generators, and geothermal or other comparable clean energy generators.

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