

Facilities board to consider eliminating disputed project worksheet

By Allen Young

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The legislative panel that sets school construction policy is scheduled to consider today modifying or eliminating a controversial form that school districts complain is burdensome and unnecessary.

But representatives for the Office of Public School Construction say the Project Information Worksheet promotes transparency in government by tracking expenditures of voter-approved bonds throughout the entire construction process.

District officials argue, however, that the data gathered from the project worksheet was intended to help members of the State Allocation Board adjust construction funding rates, but has never been used for that purpose.

Instead, they contend, the project worksheet has become another example of the state straining district resources in a perceived effort to identify abuse and save the state money.

"Instead of a partnership between the state and the school districts, there's distrust. And this distrust has manifested itself in just about everything that school districts are doing," said Joe Dixon, superintendent of facilities and government relations at Santa Ana Unified.

Dixon said that school districts already have layers of accountability mechanisms in place to keep them from misusing public funds. Thus, the time-consuming project worksheet is in itself "a waste of money," he said.

"We have a citizen's bond oversight committee that reviews every expenditure," Dixon explained. "We have the county office of education that approves and pays all purchase orders. We have contractor watchdog agencies filing public records requests. We have an annual audit of our program.

"And how about our local school board? They're looking at everything you do as well," he said.

Dixon added that data collected on the worksheets should not be used for bond accountability purposes because too many key variables are missing.

According to state documents, the worksheet collects 26 general categories of construction information, and 16 of those data sets are not collected elsewhere by the state.

The worksheet is the only document that records key information over the course of the building process, explained state officials. It also collects data on a district's bidding climate, and provides information on the benefits of high performance incentive grants.

"There's nowhere else where this kind of information on the bidding climate and high performance projects is collected," said Rebecca Kirk, spokeswoman for the OPSC. "This is an opportunity for districts to show us and the public what they're constructing with voter-approved bond funds."

The OPSC is now exploring ways to build the data into an interactive website that will help the public understand school construction costs and the different facility types being constructed, she said.

The data can also guide policymakers if they want to change grant amounts or make other programmatic changes, said Kirk.

The State Allocation Board approved the project worksheet form in 2007 as a way to analyze the relationship between construction grants and actual costs. The intention was to set the most accurate per-pupil grant amount.

According to the Coalition for Adequate School Housing, a Sacramento lobby firm, the project worksheet has never been used for that purpose.

A February letter from C.A.S.H to the chair of the allocation board stated that project worksheet data was used only once by OPSC in a 2009 construction cost study. But the data was "flawed", alleges C.A.S.H, and the board did not change the grant.

Allocation board members have since raised concerns about the worksheet, and are expected to consider modifying or eliminating it at today's meeting.

That hearing will be held in the state Capitol at 4:00 p.m. in room 444.