

Schools found eligible for state seismic funds

By Allen Young

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A team of private engineers have found 20 school buildings that appear to be eligible for a seldom-accessed earthquake retrofit grant, according to a draft report by the Office of Public School Construction.

Repairing the 20 buildings will cost up to \$13.6 million, according to rough preliminary estimates. Even if the cost were greater, they would still be just a fraction of the available \$195 million in the state's Seismic Mitigation Program that has sat largely untouched since 2006.

The news arrives as lawmakers on the State Allocation Board are set to consider folding the Seismic Mitigation Program into another more popular program that allows districts to rebuild schools damaged by natural disasters. That grant is known as the Facility Hardship Program.

The seismic program, which has only funded three projects since 2006, has languished at least in part because the eligibility criteria severely limits the amount of schools that can apply. This was done intentionally as a way to reduce the chance of the state being held liable if multiple schools did not withstand a major earthquake.

The OPSC's draft report, which confirms that six school districts appear willing and able to access the earthquake funds, will no doubt enter the seismic discussion scheduled for the upcoming board meeting on March 23.

The report was written for the state's Seismic Safety Commission and was the product of a \$200,000 grant the commission provided the OPSC in November 2009. The grant allowed the state to purchase private engineers to evaluate school buildings to see if they would hold in an earthquake.

The engineers reached out to 16 districts that had buildings that have been previously identified on a list of the state's most earthquake-vulnerable school buildings. But that inventory, known as the AB 300 list, was over a decade old and is considered out of date.

Of those 16 districts, nine chose to participate in the assessment program provided by the private engineers, and six districts ultimately qualified for the funds.

As for the remaining seven district, three – Piedmont City Unified, San Ramon Valley Unified, and West Contra Costa Unified –reported that they had already received or were about to receive state money to upgrade their buildings.

Hayward Unified and Jefferson Elementary School Districts reported that they did not have the required matching state funds to access the seismic grants, Alameda County Office said they were selling their identified building, and Los Angeles Unified cited "logistical feasibility challenges involving their two identified buildings" as a reason to decline the structural evaluation.

The OPSC is requesting the remaining \$40,000 from California Research and Assistance be used to provide those three districts with a "second chance" for a seismic risk assessment.

State officials also point out that the remaining funds may go to provide structural reviews on additional school buildings if eligibility criteria for the Seismic Mitigation Program were widened and more districts could access the money.

The Seismic Mitigation Program was established in 2006 under Proposition 1D, which set aside \$199.5 million for earthquake-related building upgrades.