

Brownley introduces \$6.1 billion school construction bond

By Allen Young

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In an effort to fill the growing funding void for school construction, Assemblywoman Julia Brownley reintroduced Thursday legislation authorizing \$6.1 billion in statewide bonds.

The bonds, which would require voter-approval, come during uncertain times as California slowly emerges from one of the worst recessions in history and many lawmakers in Sacramento – both Democrats and Republicans – have expressed reluctance to add any more to the state's already considerable debt.

Still, Brownley said voters have shown strong support for schools and there is considerable need.

"It's clear that Californian's are willing to pay more for education and I think having an education bond on the ballot is something that Californian's can support," the Democrat from Santa Monica said in an interview.

"There is lots of controversy around the water bond," she added. "There's not a lot of controversy around the education bond. I think that's plain and simple. "

The bill, AB 220, needs approval from two-thirds of both houses of the Legislature and the signature of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to go on the ballot. Brownley's hope is to put the proposal before voters this November – a ballot already crowded by an \$11 billion water bond.

The bill will be heard in the Senate Education Committee next Wednesday.

As drafted, the bill would provide \$4.6 billion total for K-12 school construction.

The funds would be divided into separate categories including \$2.5 billion for new school construction and \$1 billion for modernization projects.

There is also \$500 million directed for "high performance" grants, \$250 million for charter schools, and \$250 million for career technical education facilities. Finally, \$50 million would go to joint-use projects and \$50 million for preschools.

The remaining funds would be allocated for higher education.

Brownley originally introduced the bill last year but decided to remove the operate elements that would have put the bond on the ballot after running into both economic and political headwinds – a move she made again in January after the bill's reintroduction.

But she still faces much the same challenges. Lawmakers and the governor still face a budget deficit of nearly \$20 billion, while statewide unemployment remains above 12 percent – although down from the record high of over 12.5 percent from earlier this year.

Yet even in this climate, voters in the June primary approved local bond measures in a number of jurisdictions including Humboldt, Sonoma, San Francisco, and Orange counties.

Brownley noted that the state shares some responsibility to provide those local bonds a state match – something Sacramento is quickly becoming unable to do.

“We’re going to run out of school construction money – that’s clear,” said Brownley. “Districts up and down the state have passed their own bonds and they’re not going to have any matching funds. I think the need has been very clear.”

Another impetus to getting a statewide bond passed comes from state law that would allow local districts to impose higher developer fees if state coffers go dry and cannot provide matching funds.

If the state were to run out of new school construction cash, “level 3” builder fees could potentially force builders to bear the full cost of building new schools – an event insiders say would further damage the distressed California housing industry.