Brownley revives 2012 construction bond debate

By Allen Young

Wednesday, February 16, 2011

Assemblywoman Julia Brownley is once again interested in getting voter approval for a 2012 school construction bond**,** but the Democratic from Santa Monica stressed that serious bond talks won't start until after the June special election.

Brownley's bill, AB 331 describes intent to place a school construction bond on the 2012 November election. But Brownley said the measure is simply an attempt to jumpstart the conversation about the future of the School Facility Program – a debate that may or may not result in a new construction bond.

"Clearly we are running out of money," said Brownley, who also sits on the State Allocation Board. "But a lot of things have to be in place (for a new bond) and our number one focus is the budget."

There is unprecedented need for new school construction dollars. For all practical purposes, the state's funding program is dead. Once all the pending applications have been subtracted, the program has a balance of just $215 million.

That's only enough money to fund a handful of projects, and observers have said that districts don't want to spend up to two years preparing an application just to find out that the available slots have already been taken.

For the school modernization account, the picture is a little rosier. Once all the pending applications have been subtracted, the program has a balance of $878 million.

Keep in mind**,** however**,** that over the past 12 years, voters have approved $15.95 billion in new construction bonds and $10.9 billion for modernization – what is left is the final crumbs.

Some have estimated that the new construction program will be completely depleted within 10 months. After that, expectations are that districts with large school building projects that require state funding will simply not move those projects forward.

Under law, the state shares 50 percent of funding for new construction projects and 60 percent for modernization projects.

Discussions around the bond program are already being organized. Brownley, who chairs the Assembly Education Committee, will likely begin holding hearings on her bond bill sometime this spring.

Another allocation board member, Sen. Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, is also the incoming chair of the Senate Education Committee, and has organized a subcommittee on sustainable school facilities, which is also expected to look into the bond program.

At the California Department of Education, state schools chief Tom Torlakson – a former allocation board member – is organizing several working groups around school facilities and has also indicated that he wants to help find a solution to the bond problem.

If the upcoming tax extension measure fails, the school facility community will have to deal with the very real possibility that a new construction bond is not feasible. Amid $12.5 billion in reductions, there may be inadequate public support for adding to the state's debt ceiling.

Experts have discussed different options around dramatically changing the School Facility Program to include more local financing, but no concrete proposals have yet moved forward.