

DGS moves forward on construction program overhaul

By Allen Young

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California's two key school construction oversight agencies have proposed creation of a universal project tracking system intended to help local facility operators monitor their applications through the state's complex approval and funding process.

As part of the initiative, the California Department of Education and the Department of General Services have also proposed the creation of an interagency orientation for districts first submitting new project applications, and a state-assigned ombudsman who would track individual projects and could answer districts' questions and concerns throughout every step of the process.

These are the latest advancements of a comprehensive streamlining effort announced last June for the Office of Public School Construction and the Division of the State Architect, which both operate under DGS.

Beginning next month, the state will start hosting quarterly meetings with school construction interests to brief them on the proposals and identify other pressing problems that could conceivably be solved in a shorter time span.

"We're trying to gauge exactly what is the topic that they most want to have tackled right now in the interim while we're working on the bigger problems," said Rebecca Kirk, spokeswoman for DGS.

The first meeting is March 24 at the OPSC headquarters in Sacramento.

State officials said the greater streamlining effort comes in response to criticism that districts often feel left in the dark about their construction applications, and local concerns are sometimes drowned by state bureaucracy.

"A stumbling block might be, 'why did my application get denied? Why do every time I turn around, you deny my application? And when I call to ask for help, I just get confused,'" said Kirk from DGS.

"We want to be able to help these architects and districts in this process as much as we can," she said.

The streamlining proposals were published in a Memorandum of Understanding signed in December by representatives from the CDE and the DGS. Since then, groups of state officials and district and building interests have regularly met and discussed how the School Facility Program can be made more user-friendly.

The creation of an interagency project tracking number will require a long term, major restructuring of the information technology unit of the state Architect and other agencies, said DGS officials.

But it is also viewed as sorely needed. Project applications and plans are currently mired in a vast, complex process where they receive separate, and sometimes multiple, tracking codes at different times.

In order to acquire a single code for every project, expectations are that the agencies will first need to accomplish a great deal of other transparency work.

State officials would also like to set up a 'one stop shop' where district officials sit down with representatives of CDE, OPSC, and the state architect at the early stages of project planning, and hear perspectives and objectives from each of them.

"You come in with your plans, roll it out, and everyone says 'okay, here's what we need,'" explained Fred Yeager, assistant director of school facilities planning at the CDE.

Eventually, the state would also like to establish the individual project designee, but details on how exactly that would work are not yet available. Officials stressed that the proposals present a major undertaking and there is no timeline for completion.