

State Allocation Board remains deadlocked over use of seismic funds

By Allen Young/ SIA Cabinet Report

Wednesday, April 27, 2011

After years of debate and disagreement, the State Allocation Board again appears stalled over how best to free up approximately \$181 million that remains in state seismic retrofit grants.

The funding is critically needed in some districts, but their buildings either don't qualify under the current seismic criteria, or they do qualify but locals are reluctant to access the state funds because of a requirement that they cover over half of the total expenses with district funds.

Tuesday, the board's seismic subcommittee found itself deadlocked over rival proposals for spending the money in advance of the full board meeting set for today.

Inaction on the seismic funds comes in the wake of a widely-circulated series of articles on flaws in the state's monitoring of seismic safety in schools, which included criticism on the unspent retrofit grants.

Wednesday, state Sen. Ellen Corbett, D-San Leandro, has convened a special hearing into safety issues raised by the *California Watch* report, although Corbett is not a member of the Allocation Board.

Even with such mounting pressure, the board continues to be stuck on many of the same issues that have divided them over the use of the money for years.

One idea from Assemblywoman Joan Buchanan, D-Alamo, would fold the Seismic Mitigation Program into the Facility Hardship program, which uses less restrictive but potentially more subjective criteria.

Under that program, a district can receive matching state funds to perform a seismic retrofit if local and state engineers classify the buildings as containing an "imminent health and safety threat" to teachers and students.

But opponents of the plan noted that Proposition 1D, the 2006 ballot measure that originally authorized the seismic funds, mandated that the state identify and help fix California's "most vulnerable" schools.

Collapsing the criteria would not maintain the integrity of that requirement, argued board member Scott Harvey.

"At some point someone could challenge us and say, 'Hey, you were told it's the most vulnerable.' You got to start there," said Harvey, who is also chief deputy director for the Department of General Services, which oversees the School Facility Program.

"How are you defining most vulnerable?" he continued. "What is your guidance? What is your criteria? It isn't just someone saying 'my building might collapse.'"

Harvey said he prefers the other option before the board, which is to ease the measurement of how much a building shakes during an earthquake, known as the spectral response acceleration.

Under that plan, the board would reduce the so-called 'Sa' little by little over time in the hope that districts will move forward with submitting seismic funding applications.

But the problem with that option, Buchanan argued, is that the state has no way of knowing which schools are the most vulnerable because California does not have the resources to perform a structural analysis on every building.

"I don't know if we could ever absolutely guarantee that we are replacing the most vulnerable schools first because we might not know that for another decade," she said. "But in the meantime, we have schools that have need, that aren't safe to house kids."

Either way, school construction advocates and state officials agree that the onus is on school districts right now to perform local structural engineering reports on their buildings if they have any reason to believe that their buildings are seismically unsound.

Another outstanding issue is whether the state should provide funding for interim housing while a school undergoes a seismic upgrade. The lack of supplemental funding for interim housing has been identified as a key reason why districts have been reluctant to step forward and access the cash.

The board is expected to hear the two options for releasing the funds today as well as the consideration for providing interim housing funding.

The board will likely direct the Office of Public School Construction to formalize the options into an official recommendation that can be voted on at a later date.