

From the Schools Innovations and Advocacy Cabinet Report

Slow flow of voter bond money for school seismic projects

By Allen Young

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Two years ago, California voters approved Proposition 1D, which offered nearly \$200 million in bond money to help schools become seismic ready. Now, after a months-long effort developing an application process to allocate the money, state officials are finding districts have been slow to take up the funding offer.

In some cases, districts may be holding back because they don't have the required matching funds, which may add millions to an already lean school budget. In other districts, administrators may have moved ahead on seismic upgrades using local money.

In many other cases, however, state officials just don't know why districts that would likely qualify for the program, aren't applying.

"The fact that nobody has brought in this application has brought us some concern," said Rob Cook, executive director of the Office of Public School Construction. "Not to be alarmist, but if a district meets the criteria we've outlined, I strongly urge them to pursue this [grant money]."

Proposition 1D, approved in 2006, was a \$10.4 billion school construction bond that also set aside \$200 million to establish the state's first fund dedicated to paying for seismic retrofits at public schools.

A nine-year-old survey shows there are close to 8,000 school buildings statewide that are considered at risk during a major earthquake. While the nearly \$200 million bond would provide only a fraction of the money needed to do the retrofits, state officials have tried to create an updated inventory so that they money could be prioritized.

In April, the Division of the State Architect sent letters to every district asking for them to hire structural engineers to evaluate their buildings and submit updated information to the state.

David Thorman, head of architect division, said many schools have taken the initiative themselves to upgrade their facilities or abandon those buildings determined unsafe. He noted that the nine-year-old legislation that mandated schools perform the seismic inventory – AB 300 – may no longer be accurate.

"AB 300 is not a detailed, scientific list," said Thorman. "Since then, some districts have merged and buildings have been torn down."

Other districts have upgraded their facilities without the state's help. Such is the case with Fremont Unified, who finished their own seismic survey and made adjustments years ago with funds from a 2002 countywide bond.

"We're way ahead of AB 300," said Therese Gain, construction manager at Fremont USD. "We've been doing our own seismic retrofits for last five years," said Gain.

As it stands now, the state believes there are 23 high priority districts that would likely qualify for the Prop. 1D funds. According to the state architect, eight districts fit the criteria and have announced they wish to hire a structural engineer to verify that their system needs to be upgraded. Five have indicated interest, but have not yet committed to hiring a structural engineer. Another five have given no indication that they are interested in seeking seismic retrofits.

The OPSC is actively seeking alternative finance options to upgrade facilities, said Rob Cook, but as of now, additional state funding is not available.

"We recognize that districts that don't qualify [for prop 1D grant money] still have liability," said Cook. "Nevertheless, the safety of school children is of paramount importance. Money is a secondary consideration."