

Seismic series prompts review at community colleges, calls for change

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Groups representing parents, teachers and state engineers are calling for reforms to the state's oversight of seismic safety in public schools.

At the same time, the chief building official for the state's community college system says districts are "working feverishly" to review more than 1,000 building projects completed without receiving final safety certification.

The responses came after California Watch published its three-part series, "On Shaky Ground," about seismic safety in public schools. Reporters found thousands of public school projects had never received final safety certifications; building inspectors missed major defects or falsified reports – and were rewarded with more work; and the state has made it virtually impossible for schools to get much needed repair money.

The Professional Engineers in California Government, a union representing 13,000 engineers and related professionals employed by the state, on Wednesday called for legislation requiring that the Division of the State Architect inspect all school construction using state-employed inspectors, citing California Watch's investigation.

Currently, school districts hire these inspectors. Field engineers, who work for the state architect's office, supervise their work.

Bruce Blanning, executive director for Professional Engineers in California Government, said the group has long heard stories about "inspectors hired by the school districts having pressures put on them to approve things that maybe shouldn't be approved," he said.

The union represents the senior structural engineers and architects at the state architect's office. Adding state-employed inspectors could boost the union's membership.

And an official with the California State PTA urged the state architect's office to assure that inspections are properly completed by qualified inspectors. Vice president for community concerns Brian A. Bonner said the organization was also "dismayed" that the state has made it virtually impossible for school districts to access a pot of money set aside for urgent seismic repairs on more than 7,500 school buildings that have been listed for nearly a decade as potentially unsafe.

"Although the demand far exceeds the availability of funds, that is no excuse to do almost nothing," Bonner said.

California Watch found that at least 20,000 projects – from minor fire alarm upgrades to major construction of new classrooms – were completed without receiving final certification from the Division of the State Architect, the chief regulator of school construction.

California Watch chose to focus its initial coverage on K-12 schools because they represent the vast majority of uncertified projects. But the Field Act, state seismic regulations enacted nearly 80 years ago, also covers the state's 112 community colleges.

The community colleges had more than 1,300 building projects that lacked Field Act certification as of October 2010, according to data obtained by California Watch.

In an interview, Frederick Harris, assistant vice chancellor of college finance and facilities planning for the colleges, said the colleges had cleared the backlog by about 300 projects as of March. (View Harris' updated list of uncertified college projects.)

A few weeks before California Watch's series went live, Harris sent a memo to college CEOs urging quick action to resolve outstanding issues with uncertified building projects before "the next headline."

"There's a new push," Harris said. "There's folks who are trying to ramp up and deal with it."

Harris' March 17 memo referenced the upcoming California Watch investigation.

The subject: "DSA Certification on Projects is needed NOW! Let's Avoid the next headline!"

"We have recently become aware that 'California Watch' will soon release a multi-media event highlighting these 20,000 K-14 uncertified buildings as being seismically unsafe," Harris wrote.

"Due to recent bad press on community colleges construction activities, it behooves all of us to step up our efforts to seek certification of the remaining projects NOW as the best defense against the allegations in these articles."

Harris gave another reason for colleges to act: to avoid construction delays. If a district has a backlog of uncertified buildings, the state architect's office can hold up current projects.

The Monterey Peninsula Community College District has gotten Field Act approval for at least five of its 17 uncertified projects in the last several months, records show. None of these projects were among the 1,100 red-flagged by the state architect's office as having safety defects.

Steve Morgan, the district's director of facilities, planning and management, said the district has held weekly meetings with the project inspector, architect and construction management team to work on the uncertified project backlog.

Recently certified projects include a new college library technology center, a new bridge and alterations to a gym building, among others.

The team has dug up records that were never sent to the state architect's office or were sent but were not filed properly, Morgan said.

Morgan said the district has not discovered any safety defects among the uncertified projects reviewed so far. He feels confident in the safety of his district's building projects. Still, he said he decided to get involved personally in the effort to certify old building projects after receiving Harris' March 17 memo.

Morgan expects it will take two to three months to obtain final certification from the state architect's office for the remainder of the district's uncertified building projects.

"If I wasn't in this business, and I was from the outside looking in, and I heard that these buildings weren't DSA-certified, it would make me stop and try to catch my breath and try to figure out, why not and are they safe?"