

Schools scramble to ensure buildings are safe

District: Paperwork to blame for seismic questions

Lily Bixby, Half Moon Bay Review, 4-14-11

An investigation into the state's failure to enforce earthquake safety regulations revealed last week that a handful of Cabrillo Unified School District buildings haven't received earthquake safety certification. District administrators, however, say the local schools are entirely safe and that they expect the problem is with paperwork, not the buildings themselves.

California Watch, a Berkeley-based nonprofit public affairs reporting group, found the agency that's supposed to regulate school construction - the Division of the State Architect - failed to act on about 1,100 building projects pinned for safety defects. In all, roughly 20,000 projects have never received the needed safety certification and 7,500 school buildings were deemed seismically risky, according to California Watch. That amounts to 14 percent of the total square footage of California's public K-12 schools, the organization reports.

CUSD Facilities Director Jim Tjogas and Superintendent Rob Gaskill say they are sure the district's buildings are safe for Coastside children even though some paperwork is not complete.

"I am confident that all our buildings meet safety guidelines," Gaskill said. All of the district's building issues have been downgraded from structural "safety issues" to "paper issues," he said.

The state agency in question has been known to keep messy records. School names are misspelled and sites are misplaced on the official database. The address for Cunha Intermediate School was mistakenly located at the district office on Kelly Street.

School construction projects generate paperwork that has to go through the State Architect office. With all school districts in California funneling paperwork through the agency, it doesn't surprise Gaskill that there could be technical issues.

There are about a dozen projects throughout the district the State Architect has flagged as incomplete and uncertified to meet California's seismic safety standards. It could be as simple as the State Architect failing to file the correct paperwork, Tjogas said.

Besides these uncertified projects, one Half Moon Bay High project appears on a list the state uses to identify older school buildings that need to be evaluated for seismic safety. The high school project listed is a 10,000-square-foot building that hasn't been reviewed or retrofitted, according to the Division of the State Architect.

The exact location of the building was not available, but the district has requested records that will provide more information.

Hatch Elementary School received the most severe "Letter 4" ranking for a project, which indicated there were safety-related deficiencies. In March 2010, that project was downgraded to a "Letter 3," which could indicate a paperwork issue.

The building under question at Hatch may be a portable building constructed by the city, but this can only be confirmed once the district gets more information from the regional State Architect's office, Tjogas said.

Gaskill said he immediately asked Tjogas for clarification when he read the California Watch report.

Tjogas has been in contact with the regional director of the State Architect to get the paperwork on the buildings sent from the agency's Sacramento office to its Oakland office. Within a couple weeks Tjogas said he hopes to begin working through the "paperwork glitches."