

The Daily Camera

URL: http://www.dailycamera.com/bdc/schools/article/0,1713,BDC_2488_4516134,00.html

Repairs needed statewide

Funding through local district property taxes contributes to problem

By Amy Bounds, Camera Staff Writer

March 5, 2006

Every school district in the state is struggling to come up with enough money to maintain aging schools and, in growing districts, build new ones.

A 2003 Colorado state auditor's report estimated the total cost to get all the state's schools in good physical condition was about \$4.7 billion.

About 70 percent of districts said they needed to replace or repair heating and ventilation systems, while about 65 percent reported roofs in bad shape. About 88 percent reported at least one major "health and safety" need.

A recent assessment by the Denver-based Donnell-Kay Foundation puts the need between \$5.7 billion and \$10 billion, which includes building new schools in growing areas.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation is studying the issue and has found the state's capital construction funding system "grossly unequal and inadequate."

"This is not something that has seriously been addressed at the state level," said the Donnell-Kay Foundation's Mary Wickersham.

Colorado is one of only a few states where school district capital needs are paid for almost exclusively through local district property taxes.

The state distributes a similar amount of money to each district for operating costs. But raising money for school construction, maintenance and repair is based mainly on wealth.

Districts must ask voters to approve a property tax increase — and the amount that can be raised is capped at 20 percent of a district's total property value.

That means some districts can raise enough to build multiple new schools, while others can't raise enough to buy portable classrooms. Statewide, 40 percent of the 178 school districts aren't wealthy enough to build a single new school.

As a wealthier district, Boulder Valley doesn't have to worry as much about bonding debt limits.

Instead, Boulder Valley, St. Vrain Valley and Denver metro school districts are limited by how much voters are willing to increase their taxes. School construction ballot measures are never enough to cover all of a district's needs, Wickersham said.

Take the state's largest school district, Jefferson County. Jefferson County voters approved a \$323.8 million bond issue in 2004, but the district still has a backlog of about \$1 billion in needs.

In St. Vrain Valley, the district initially asked for \$353 million in 2001, but the measure didn't pass. A pared-down \$212.9 million bond issue — focused exclusively on expanding school capacity, making basic repairs and improving safety — did pass in 2002. Voters also passed a \$98.7 million measure in 1997.

"Even if there was no argument about the need, it's difficult to get people to commit to those huge amounts," said Kathy Hall, former St. Vrain Valley school board president. "There's never going to be enough money."

While a big portion of St. Vrain's capital money goes to building new schools, the main issue for Boulder Valley and other flat growth districts is the snowball effect of deferred maintenance.

For example, putting off repairing a leaky roof one year may mean a leaky roof and damaged ceiling tiles the next year.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation and others are pushing for the state to find a more equitable way of paying for school construction and repairs. Legal action also may be on the agenda.

Parents of children in six rural Colorado school districts in 1998 filed a lawsuit against the state over the funding system, citing everything from unsafe fire alarm systems to poor lighting.

The lawsuit was settled out of court, with the state agreeing to spend \$190 million over 10 years on the most serious needs. So far, the state has only paid about \$15 million, prompting those who originally sued to consider going back to court.

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