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## **School construction stays on fast track Building, repair funds not tied to salaries, programs**

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Despite deep cuts to programs and personnel in public education, one department's coffer is overflowing: the one that oversees school construction.

Never has there been so much money in California to build new schools and fix old ones. About half the school districts in San Diego County are building or renovating schools this summer.

San Diego Unified School District is spending \$1 million a day as part of its effort to renovate 105 schools this summer, adding new libraries and science labs and upgrading plumbing. Concurrently, the district has slashed programs and personnel to close a \$73.4 million budget gap. More than 400 nonteaching jobs were eliminated.

"It's confusing," said Lou Smith, chief administrative officer for the San Diego district. "You're looking at deep cuts where folks have lost their jobs, and then we're spending millions of dollars on what is probably the biggest civil works program in the history of San Diego."

School construction and school operation are funded by separate pots of money, with school construction in California funded primarily through state and local bond money.

Two major factors bolstered school construction budgets in the new millennium and allowed districts to treat themselves to face lifts.

In 2000, Californians passed Proposition 39, making it easier for districts to pass school construction bonds. The measure reduced the support needed for passage from two-thirds to 55 percent.

In November 2002, a record \$13 billion state school construction bond was passed by voters, and the picture may get even rosier.

The Legislature is planning a \$12.3 billion school construction bond for the March ballot.

The dichotomy is especially apparent in the Vista Unified School District.

After passing a \$139.8 million bond and securing \$41 million from the state, district officials hail this as the golden age of school construction.

This summer Vista has embarked on its most aggressive undertaking: building four schools and renovating five campuses.

"I've been in this business for 20 years, and for people in my job this is a dream come true," said Mike Vale, director of facilities. "There are so many resources available."

But the state fiscal crisis has hit Vista Unified hard, and the school district has let go 152 teachers, increased kindergarten class sizes, and laid off dozens of computer technicians, office clerks and custodians.

"This is really the tale of two cities," Vale said.

Many educators describe the building boom as a catch-up after years of neglect.

"There's a lot of construction going on to make up for what has been unattended for many years," said Ramona schools Superintendent Peter Schiff.

But the boom in building and the bust in programming and personnel have left parents confused, and they have trouble understanding how a district can cut employees, yet build schools.

"They don't believe we're properly using funds when we do construction or prepare new schools in the face of an economy that seems to be on a downslope," said Cheryl Ernst, superintendent of the Carlsbad Unified School District.

The Carlsbad school board recently voted to increase class sizes in some grades, eliminate the elementary music program, and cut stipends for middle school coaches. Yet the district finished renovating a new district office, and will begin building a new middle school this month.

"It's not a matter of making choices," said Ernie Silva, legislative advocate for California's Coalition for Adequate School Housing, a Sacramento lobbying firm. "You can't decide to lay off teachers or build schools."

In most cases, the state supplies 50 percent of the cash for new construction and 60 percent toward modernizations. The law prohibits districts from using construction money for teacher salaries or other programs.

"Otherwise you would never build a school because teachers and parents always legitimately want to pay teachers more," Silva said. "And we all want that. But then you never get around to things that are less glamorous, like fixing holes in roofs and maintenance."

School district budgets have suffered the heaviest hit in school operation funding. The state Legislature has adopted a budget that addresses a multibillion dollar deficit through borrowing and spending cuts. Education took less of a hit than initially proposed, but cuts to school spending still are severe.

Local school districts have laid off teachers, slashed art programs, and curtailed busing.

In Oceanside, more than 5,000 fewer students will be bused to school, the general elementary music program was eliminated and some nursing positions were cut.

"You can see the school board agonizing over it and at the same time they're telling us to keep building," said Katy Wright, director of planning and construction for the Sweetwater Union High School District."

Just after the Sweetwater school board voted to increase class size for ninth-grade English, the district opened a new high school and middle school.

"I can't go fast enough," Wright said. "We're all in a race to get in line for state money. If you get your plans in when there's still state money, you win the race."

The building boom has made it difficult to find construction companies that aren't booked.

Poway school board member Linda Vanderveen described the construction frenzy as "a ray of sunshine," after cutting millions in programs from her district's budget.

Poway Unified recently passed a \$198 million bond that will pay for upgrades at 23 schools and replacement of one elementary school.

Escondido Union School District passed a \$46.3 construction bond in March 2002 to build an elementary school and a middle school and refurbish 19 campuses, while La Mesa-Spring Valley School District passed a \$44 million bond to improve 22 schools. Eight months later, voters in the Fallbrook Union Elementary School District approved a \$32 million bond measure that would pay for upgrades at deteriorating campuses, and many other districts recently started construction projects.

Vista schools Superintendent Dave Cowles said even if districts could use construction dollars for other purposes it would be unwise.

The economic downturn is cyclical and temporary, Cowles said, while the new schools may last for a century.

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