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Mendocino schools have facilities maintenance assessed

By CONNIE KORBEL Of The Beacon --

"Since 1990, the [Mendocino Unified School] district has prioritized educational programs over maintenance in expending its resources," states the June 2 Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team report. "As a result some of the district's physical plant has deteriorated, and a considerable financial investment will be necessary to improve the plant to a higher standard. This deterioration is exacerbated by extreme weather conditions."

Cutting to the chase, the state's Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) found the maintenance department understaffed, underbudgeted, lacking in training and the means to do the job adequately.

"The proposed deferred maintenance plan is not an accurate description of plant needs," states the report.

The school district's newly hired superintendent, Catherine Stone, inherited the facility problems and the study. Stone said, "I don't think this is unusual in California school districts. With increased pressure for student performance and dwindling fiscal resources, the educational programs and our students took priority.

"However, we do need to take good care of our facilities, and we will be working to bring them back up to the standard expected by our community.

"The recently completed renovation of the multipurpose room at the grammar school is an example of what we hope to achieve district-wide. We took a building that was in horrid condition, and by using state funding as well as district funds, we've reopened a critical school resource."

MUSD trustees requested a FCMAT maintenance and operations review in January that was conducted Feb. 27 through March 1. The study was to provide recommendations for improving staff efficiency and effectiveness in meeting district-wide maintenance needs.

Former Interim Superintendent Carol Perry negotiated a \$1,500 price for the study, which would have cost \$4,071.79 before the invoice was adjusted down.

Team assists school districts

California Assembly Bill 1200, which helps schools meet and sustain fiscal standards and obligations, created the FCMAT in 1992. Assembly Bill 2756 provides the FCMAT with special duties with regard to districts that have emergency state loans.

Comprehensive assessments are available in all key operational areas. FCMAT's services range from fiscal crisis intervention to management review and professional development training. It is funded through the state budget and a moderate fee schedule for services it provides schools.

Moving into this academic year, FCMAT has performed nearly 600 reviews to date. Its management assessments are by far the most often requested, with fiscal, transportation and technology assistance rounding out the top three. Demands were slow in the early years, but have grown considerably since 2003. Of the 982 large and small California school districts, well over half have benefited from these services, some multiple times.

This is the first time MUSD has asked for help from FCMAT.

Mendocino County Office of Education engaged FCMAT to conduct a fiscal review in July 1993, Point Arena utilized reorganization services in May 1996, and Ukiah Unified School district received a technology assessment in January 2002.

Stone said, "Like most superintendents, I am well-aware of the services offered by FCMAT, though I haven't had direct experience in the past. They are very-well regarded."

MUSD's funding philosophy

Due to the school district's restricted and reduced funding since 1990, trustees have focused resources on education programming. As a result, the report states, "a considerable financial investment will be necessary to improve the plant to a higher standard."

The district began transferring additional maintenance funds above the mandated one-half of 1 percent annual level in 2002-03. The additional funds transferred are about \$24,000 each year.

While this new outlay will not sustain the effort now required, after years of neglect and given the level of extensive repairs now needed, FCMAT recommends an additional amount of MUSD's unrestricted funds be redirected to the restricted repair and maintenance fund. This money would be used to focus more on ongoing needs, such as routine yearly classroom painting, carpet replacements, and repairs and replacement of driveways and parking lots.

"Some classrooms have not been painted in 20 years," states the report.

"This approach," the report reads, "balances expenditures to protect the district's investment in facilities as well as providing the appropriate level of funding for educational programs."

Findings

FCMAT reports that the district increased the deferred maintenance fund, which accumulates money for major and costly repairs or replacements, such as roofing, that will be needed at a later date. The report commends this action as "a proactive and prudent decision," but states the same needs to be done for the ongoing maintenance fund.

"These additional dollars would allow the district to focus on both crisis and hardship projects."

Deferred maintenance plan

For the 2005-06 fiscal year, \$100,000 was allocated for seven paving, one plumbing, five roofing, two underground tank and 13 wall system repair projects. What the district spent was \$76,024.58 for repainting the exterior of the middle school, installing new doors, bathroom stalls, and the listed plumbing and roofing jobs.

"The department operates in response to crises," the report says. "When equipment breaks down, the department responds to a work order either in emergency or routine form."

"Some preventive maintenance is being performed on the boilers and with the changing of filters, but no formal plan or schedules have been established."

The study notes that for the current year there is no funding for electrical work, floor covering — "on site inspection indicated that carpet needs to be replaced in many areas," heating, ventilation and air conditioning, or painting.

The study recommends an overall evaluation of the facilities and a well thought out plan for maintenance, preventive maintenance and a capital improvement plan be prepared.

Staffing

FCMAT recommended maintenance staffing be increased by one full-time equivalent and job descriptions, "which do not adequately represent actual jobs," be updated.

The report characterized the maintenance staff as small in comparison to similarly sized districts throughout California. It states that the district currently contracts for painting at prevailing wages and asserts that a painter on staff would be more cost effective and could address the problems in deferred painting projects.

Also included is the groundskeeper position, which splits work hours between cleaning the district office, assisting at the middle school, and maintaining landscaping at six separate school sites.

"This is a great deal of work for one individual to successfully complete," the report says.

The recommendation is to make landscaping a full-time job and reassign custodial duties to another position.

Training

The study finds, "the maintenance department lacks some essential trade skills. Only one of the three maintenance employees possesses journeyman skills." In particular, the report calls for formal training in the use of chemicals.

Also noted is the "relatively new" employment of both principals and their responsibility for supervising utility workers, but with limited experience in maintaining the facilities they're overseeing. The report recommends some formal training in plant operations for them.

Transportation

There are three vehicles for four employees. They are a 1980 GMC flatbed one-ton pickup truck, and two GMC trucks — 1987 and 1991— with utility beds. The 1980 vehicle was out of service during the evaluation, leaving four employees to double up with two vehicles and thus limiting their access to two sites at any given time.

The report finds that, "given the size and geographic locations of the district's sites, adequate maintenance coverage will be attained only if each employee has a vehicle."

The recommendation is for the district to set aside an annual amount, as it does for bus replacements, to spread the cost over several years for maintenance vehicles.

The immediate recommendation is for the district to purchase a used vehicle to provide each maintenance staff member with access to one.

"This proactive approach allows the district to replace vehicles before they become a safety issue," says the report.

Work orders

The study found the department still uses a manual work order system and typewritten log which "requires an excessive amount of time to be spent on typing"

The report recommends the district purchase a software package, and move away from the manual process to a computerized one, and to track work orders by site.

It also suggests each school site be equipped with a basic tool kit, so site employees can perform light maintenance duties, such as changing lights, unplugging drains and installing chalkboards.

Custodial function

They found, "the quality of cleaning varies depending on the site and the individual custodian." The resulting recommendations are to establish a written route and time schedule for each worker, and set agreed upon cleaning standards.

The report states that progressive schools throughout California are taking a new view on cleaning duties. They recommend promoting the responsibility for school cleanliness as part of everyone's job, including students.

They suggest creating a "Clean Up Our School Day," or something with the same intent — as many other districts already do — to establish a community volunteer program to perform light clean up for routine maintenance, grounds and custodial help.

District comments

According to MUSD Superintendent Stone, several of the recommendations have already begun and others will be

implemented this year.

"It is my plan to establish a training program for our maintenance staff in order to enhance their skills," said Stone. "We've completed a reclassification study which will help us with updating the job descriptions.

Stone said they took advantage of Parlin Fork Conservation Camp crews to help with grounds work over the summer, and they are acquiring a fully-equipped vehicle with toolboxes and racks for maintenance use from Pacific Gas & Electric.

"We've continued to augment the deferred maintenance funds and conducted facilities needs assessments at each site. The maintenance supervisor will begin working on a long term preventive maintenance plan," Stone said.

"In reality, we'll be working on implementing as many of the recommendations as feasible this year our facilities are the face of our district, and we need to make sure that they are up to snuff," she said.

MUSD Board of Directors President Gloria Liner said, "The FCMAT report provides observations and very helpful suggestions. It gives us a blueprint for effective strategies going forward. Catherine's skill at quick implementation is already showing excellent results. The maintenance staff is doing a great job getting the campuses ready for the start of the new school year."

Stone summarized her impression of the study and her plans.

"The district has spent a lot of time putting out brush fires' over the last few years, just keeping up with the most urgent of maintenance needs. The FCMAT report is an excellent guide for us to use as we begin to undertake a more comprehensive maintenance program. Now that we have more staffing, we hope to get on top of things a bit more, and maybe even get out front. The FCMAT report is most helpful in thinking through the most efficient way to use our manpower." Stone said.