

Mendocino Beacon

School OK'd contract despite inflated costs

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By CONNIE KORBEL Of The Beacon -

The Mendocino Unified School Board continued to move forward cautiously when it awarded the \$361,000 contract to Stark & Thornton Construction for repairs on the grammar school multi-purpose room two weeks ago.

Board President Gloria Liner opened the discussion by explaining the need "to get the K-5 children out of the rain" this winter. Liner is concerned that, "We don't have a school that matches who we are as a community."

Superintendent Jim Shock told the trustees, "Not doing this project now will leave us nowhere moving forward and won't even leave us in a stagnant position. It will leave us in a retrogressive position because at some point we do need to go forward with doing something with that building. Waiting will increase the costs."

Earlier this year the best "guesstimate" was the project would cost \$230,000. The actual contract is for \$361,000.

Architect Mark Quattrocchi responded to a series of pointed questions from trustees regarding why there was only one bidder, why the bid is so much higher than anticipated, and what, if anything, could be done about the additional costs.

Quattrocchi explained the project as having essentially three components: Repairing dry rot damage to the center wing, dealing with water infiltration (below and above damage), and internal improvements necessary to get students back inside, the largest expense being the replacement of the oil tank.

Speculating, based on other experiences, the primary reason for the lack of bids is the costly state requirement that all contractors place three different bonds bid, performance and payment for school construction projects.

"It's probably the single driving force that stops a lot of builders [from bidding on these projects,] he explained.

About half of the increased expenses were attributed to more extensive dry rot damage than originally thought and additional work specified by the State Architects Office, mostly related to handicapped access requirements. Some of these cost overruns will be mitigated by additional Structural Rehabilitation Program dollars from the state.

Quattrocchi offered to do whatever he can to find ways to cut the figures down.

Trustee Michael Schaeffer, shocked at the percent of increase in the bid, wanted to stall for more time, hoping for more options to be looked into.

"I don't like being in a situation of spending money we've identified we don't have," he said.

Trustee David Wylie interjected, "We wouldn't be here today if we'd invested in maintenance. We [now] have to spend a great deal of money because we didn't. It's a statement on why maintenance is so important. As a community, we've ignored it.

"We're spending a great deal of money because we didn't invest in the future. We need a serious maintenance program going forward. It's going to get a lot more expensive in the future. We have to do this."

Trustee Rod Jones, who characterized it as "a bitter pill to swallow," asked whether the board is willing to stick its neck out and have the optimism that it will find a way to cover the identified deficit.

His response to his question was, "For me, this is the one project that should not be delayed. It's already been delayed too long. I don't see any other way but to approve."

Sally Swan, business manager, laid out a deficit plan to cover the remaining costs that met board approval. Essentially, if needed, a loan will be incurred that replaces the lease payments on the now abandoned portables. The loan payments would likely be considerably less than the portables' lease.

Liner compared the disparity between the wonderful school facilities enjoyed by the children in Comptche, Elk and Albion with those in Mendocino.

She expressed her position in this way: "If we allow our children to continue to go into environments that are substandard or to go without minimal requirements that our children have at other areas of our district ... There's no justification for the children in the central area of the community being treated as less than, or not deserving as much as our other children.

"We have an obligation to provide these children with appropriate housing. I don't see any value in delaying."

In the end Schaeffer said, "I move we go forward despite my concerns." His motion to award the contract passed unanimously.

Principal Bronwyn Rhoades added, just before the trustees took the vote, "I have 132 children who need a place to be indoors for PE, a place to play when it's raining and a place to gather with the families of those children when we have school events.

"We've waited a long time to have a central heart to our school and a gathering place. I would really urge you, despite the surprising cost the bid came in at, to move forward with this. It would be a huge morale boost."

Later, after the meeting, Shock said, "After months, years, we are finally able to begin moving forward with repairing the grammar school and providing much-needed housing for our youngest students."