

School district may be short \$1 million for construction

by Robb Fulcher

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Because of soaring construction costs, the school district may be about \$1 million short of realizing its plans for a complex that includes a new gymnasium, science lab, library and classrooms at Hermosa Valley School. The district's construction consulting firm, PCM3, made the shortfall estimate at a meeting last week of a committee helping to oversee the expenditure of school bonds set aside for the construction. Officials stressed that the \$1 million estimate is a tentative one, and a number of upcoming developments might change that estimate substantially.

"We are looking at a project that is going to be a challenge, but it's a challenge we hope we can meet," school board President Lance Widman said.

The school district started out with \$15.6 million in local and state bonds to fund the new buildings and to upgrade the plumbing, electricity, safety features, handicapped access, heating, air conditioning and technology-lab features at Valley School and Hermosa View School.

The upgrades cost nearly \$10 million, leaving the district with \$5.8 remaining for the new buildings at Valley. Widman said, if needed, more money could be found by building the library in a joint venture with the nonprofit Friends of the Library, which helps support the local branch of the Los Angeles County Library. In addition, the school district could enter into a joint venture with the Beach Cities Health District for construction of the gym, Widman said.

There is some indication there may be funding from the state for a joint venture," he said. A possible joint venture with the Health District was discussed in earlier school board meetings.

"We have tried to indicate to the health district, hey, at least keep the door open for discussions," Widman said. Current plans call for all of the new construction to take place in the southwestern portion of the Valley School campus, which stands along Valley Drive north of Pier Avenue and serves grades 3 through 8.

Sam Abrams, chairman of a committee that helps to oversee the expenditure of the local bonds -- \$13.6 million approved by Hermosa voters in 2002 -- said the district has been thrifty, but construction costs have risen because of a glut of school bonds and the rising costs of cement and other construction materials.

The upgrading project was completed \$200,000 under budget. But that budget took into account construction costs that were much lower when the bonds were approved, Abrams and Widman said.

"A square foot has gone from \$250 to \$300 over a six-month period," Widman said. "That's unheard of." ER

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