

State to get tough on rural school design quality

by Bob Speed
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Richard H. Holden, deputy commissioner of the Public Works Department says the state is moving toward a "get tough now" policy on architectural quality in public schools.

His statement came Friday as part of the final presentation before the Alaska School Board meeting in Ketchikan three days last week.

Discussion centered on buck-passing by state agencies and private architects which resulted in construction of an inadequate

school building in the village of Shismaref, near Kotzebue. Holden used the case as just one example of inadequate planning and inspection.

Board member Jan Hohman, of Nome, noted that children in Shismaref have no running water for showers after physical education classes and that the school sometimes doesn't receive enough power for both lights and heat at certain times of day. "So they have to decide whether they want to see or be warm," Mrs. Hohman said.

Architect Malcolm Roberts, appearing with Holden before

the board, agreed that the situation in the village of fewer than 250 people "is a mess," saying "I think it's fortunate the Shismaref thing didn't hit the press before the (state school construction bond) election."

Holden said the problems in the small town were examples of what should not be done, telling the board that blame ranged from the village itself, where decisions were made to alter building plans, to state agencies where people did not adequately inspect either the plans or construction when under way. He said he had fired one employee as a result of the Shismaref boondoggle.

The answer, he said, lay in designing a set of prototype plans to standardize school construction in the future.

"You can't take three classrooms, take out some walls, put up a chalkboard, put a basketball net above that and put a wrestling mat on the wall to protect the blackboard and call it a multi-purpose room," he said, which is what happened in Shismaref.

He said a school design must fit the needs of the local community it will serve, as well as the climate and geology of the area. He said a building code for school construction is now being formulated by the public works department, an effort applauded by the board. He said the code would reduce construction costs and prevent many mistakes common to non-standardized construction. The public works department is responsible for all school construction in the state, except when delegated to other agencies by the legislature.

Board member Beverly Horn said after the meeting that rural schools have enough pro-

blems without inadequate construction in the first place. She said the state has no money to replace buildings lost in fires or other calamities, adding that at least six bush schools have been lost to fire in the past five years. She said insurance is either prohibitively expensive for rural schools or nonexistent due to inadequate fire protection facilities and training. She said children whose bush schools are destroyed and who live in communities where no other building is available for classes have little choice but correspondence study.

Another problem common to rural schools is vandalism, board members said. Holden said the best way to prevent vandalism is to get entire village populations involved in school construction, even if it's "moving rocks or laying carpet." He said pride in the finished product would be "the best deterrent."