

BIA schools cheaper to build new than renovate

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Tundra Times

At the beginning of this school year, the Bureau of Indian Affairs turned 17 elementary schools over to the state — most all in poor condition in violation of state fire and other safety codes. Over \$11 million in federal funds has been set aside to upgrade these schools, but thanks to regulations which may prevent those funds from being used in the most efficient, least expensive way, the money is being held up.

Federal regulations governing the use of the funds mention maintenance and upgrading, but say nothing of new construction.

Now, at least one of the four Rural Education Attendance Area School Districts to which the BIA schools have been transferred, contends that in most instances it will be more economical to build new additions to existing high school buildings than it will be to upgrade them to meet state fire, life safety, mechanical, electrical and handicap access codes.

That school district is the Lower Kuskokwim School District, headquartered in Bethel, which inherited former BIA schools at 10 village sites.

Carl Peterson, Superinten-

dent of the Lower Kuskokwim School District, explained that the school district commissioned an engineering study of the structural and educational program deficiencies of the BIA buildings.

The school district's philosophy was that its limited funds should be used primarily for student instruction while expenditures on plant maintenance and other activities which do not relate directly toward education, should be minimized, Peterson said.

A study of 20-year life-cycle costs for five alternatives involving replacements or upgrades of the inherited school structures was completed in January 1983. The \$330,000 engineering study was paid for with school district revenues, Peterson said.

As a result of this study and some earlier review work, upgrading was recommended at only two schools, Napakiak and Oscarville. In six cases, new structures added to existing high school buildings were clearly cost saving. In the remaining two cases, there was less than an eight percent cost differential between upgrading and new construction, leading the school district also to recommend new construction as the preferred alternative in these instances.

"We have been working through Sen. John Sackett of the Alaska legislature to change or clarify the federal legislative intent so the money may be used for new construction as well," Peterson said.

Sackett's staff reports that this matter was discussed with Senator Stevens on his visit to Juneau last month. Stevens initial reaction was that there would be no difficulty achieving the required legislative intent, the staffer said.

Excluding Napakiak, where construction of a new combined elementary and high school is estimated at \$1.2 million, the Lower Kuskokwim School District estimates its preferred scenario of new school construction and one code upgrading would cost approximately \$41 million. This figure includes initial project costs and 20-year life-cycle costs. On the other hand, code upgrading only at all sites would cost over \$50 million.

Requests for \$7.4 million in state funds for new construction at Goodnews Bay, Kwethluk, and Kwigillingok are included in Governor Sheffield's 1984 capital budget, Peterson said. Approximately \$7.4 million is expected in BIA funds. The balance over the 20 years would have to

be met from school district revenues and state capital grants.

"Before we enter into any contracts involving these buildings, our school board is looking for assurances that we can reasonably expect to have dollars available to complete the projects and maintain the buildings," Peterson said.

Following is a summary of the findings of the Lower Kuskokwim School District study based on 20-year costs in 1983 dollars. The high schools referenced were built in 1979 or 1980 while most of the elementary school buildings are 18 to 25 years old.

Goodnews Bay: Has an enrollment of 62 students, equally split between K-8 and 9-12. A new addition to the high school would cost 50 percent less than upgrading the existing elementary school which has no sanitary facilities.

Kwethluk: Has an enrollment of 87 in K-8 and 43 in 9-12. A new addition to the high school would be 25 percent less expensive than remodeling a six classroom wooden facility and separate utility/restroom and wastewater facilities.

Kwigillingok: Enrollment of 44 in K-8 and 38 in 9-12. Because the existing elementary school is 25 years old

and susceptible to tidal flooding, only the addition to the high school is considered a viable alternative.

Nightmute: Enrollment of 29 in K-8, 13 in 9-12. Same situation as Kwigillingok.

Mekoryuk: Enrollment of 58 students, equally divided between K-8 and 9-12. Remodeling the high school in order to add the square footage allowed by the Department of Education guidelines for a K-12 school would cost 32 percent less than renovating the elementary school and a separate utilities building.

Napaskiak: Enrollment of 65 in K-8 and 38 in 9-12. Constructing a new elementary school addition to the high school instead of upgrading four separate buildings making up the elementary school complex would result in a 15 percent savings.

Oscarville: Enrollment of 16 in the elementary school. High school students attend school across the river in Napaskiak. The existing building requires minimal upgrading and remodeling so only that alternative is recommended.

Quinhagak: Enrollment of 85 in K-8 and 56 in 9-12. An addition to the high school would cost only 5.5 percent more than upgrading and operating. (Continued on Page Sixteen)

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ating four separate elementary school buildings. Consequently new construction is recommended.

Tununak: Enrollment of 63 in K-8 and 97 in 9-12. An addition to the high school would cost only 7.8 percent more than upgrading the elementary school building so the former is the preferred alternative.

In order for students to begin the 1982-83 school year in the former BIA buildings, some immediate life-safety code upgrading had to be accomplished, Peterson said. Fire alarms and exit lights were installed in all classroom buildings. This was accomplished with \$300,000 in fiscal 1982 federal funds with an additional \$120,000 in school district funds expended, he noted.

Some \$843,000 in additional costs are anticipated for next fall's classes, he continued. These expenditures will be necessary, unless fire marshall regulations could be waived, to meet what is labelled "life-safety priority number two." This would involve sheetrocking of school furnace rooms, covering exposed electrical wiring, and installing sprinkler systems in classrooms, said Peterson.

So far, Senator Sackett,

who is co-chair of the Senate Finance Committee, hasn't heard about any similar preliminary work in the three other affected REAA school districts, his staffer said. Bering Straits is operating former BIA elementary schools in four villages. Lower Yukon has inher-

ited BIA schools in two villages and Chatham REAA has had to take over one former BIA school.

In the next two years, the remaining 20 elementary education school programs operated by the BIA in Alaska will be transferred to the state.

Ten more of these are within the jurisdictional boundaries of the Lower Kuskokwim School District.

State sentiments were echoed by Education Commissioner Lind at a recent hearing of the House Health, Education and Social Services Committee

on school foundation funding.

"We do not feel the federal government should walk away and leave facilities that are less than adequate," he said. "The state will pick up the operating costs. The federal government has a responsibility to bring facilities up to code."