



The Hot Iron

Maintenance cuts are common in a faltering economy, but incentives can help you save big

Joetta Sack-Min

You built it. They came. And now the school facility that once was the pride of the community, perhaps even the one that you helped plan, is looking outdated.

Keeping an existing school up to date with the latest technologies, high-performance features, and trends in teaching and learning can be an arduous task. And the budget for routine maintenance and repairs tends to be the first item cut in these hard economic times, which contributes to the decline.

But if your district can afford to renovate or rebuild, you have some unprecedented opportunities. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, more commonly known as the federal stimulus package, is giving states and districts incentives for a variety of school construction, renovation, energy-efficiency projects, even cafeteria upgrades. While only a small fraction of the Recovery Act's main K-12 funds will go toward school improvements, despite President Obama's original intentions, several smaller programs provide tax credits and interest-free or low-in-

terest loans for renovations and green, or sustainable, features.

"There are more opportunities than we've seen in a long time," says Edwin Schmidt, an architect with Fanning Howey Associates, an architectural and engineering firm based in Medina, Ohio. "There are the three most important things in place: There is a will to do it, an economy that allows you to do it, and a workforce that is willing to do it."

Adding to that, the economy has left builders in many areas struggling to stay

afloat. That can be an advantage for districts, as prices for contractors' services, materials, and labor are much cheaper than in recent years, lopping off as much as 20 percent a project, according to some construction managers.

"The iron is hot for securing bids, planners, architects, engineers, and suppliers," says John Ramsey, the executive director of the Council for Educational Facility Planners International. "School boards are in a unique position because they are getting far more people bidding on projects than ever before, and if you do the math, that equates to quality and a low price. Many of these firms just want to stay in business."

RENOVATION INNOVATION

Even though states and districts have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in upgrades in recent years, there is always a need for more, particularly in low-income districts. Last year, a report by the American



Grosse Pointe Academy in Michigan was honored with a citation of excellence for its complete renovation of the historic Moran Building.

Federation of Teachers estimated that schools across the country needed more than \$250 billion for maintenance, new schools, repairs, renovations, and additions to house growing populations.

The general rule for determining whether to build new or renovate a school building considers the costs of both. If a renovation project would cost less than 65 percent than the cost of new construction, school districts generally are advised to keep their old buildings.

But renovating doesn't mean that a district is stuck with an old building with a few upgrades.

"There are all sorts of things schools can and should be doing in terms of modernization," says Sue Robertson, an educational facility planner and president of the Planning Alliance in New Orleans. "The first thing you should look at is the building that's already there."

Features such as lighting, windows, and insulation can be changed relatively easily, and more dramatic makeovers can transform the way the school building is used.

For instance, classrooms are typically smaller in schools built in the 1960s and 1970s, and renovations of those facilities often entail moving walls, Robertson says. Another common renovation is rewiring a building to handle computers and other

technologies.

Making school buildings environmentally friendly and energy efficient, or going green, has been the biggest trend in school design for the past decade, and building a new school with sustainable features has become the norm.

And while many school officials associate the trend only with new buildings, there are plenty of ways to renovate an existing building to make it a more sustainable facility. Renovated buildings can even achieve designation through LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), the main program that evaluates and awards ratings to green buildings, or other programs that validate green construction.

Fanning Howey is working with the Washington, D.C., school district to renovate several of its buildings using green strategies and materials. Like many other urban districts, Washington's school system has seen its enrollment drop significantly in recent years and has a glut of buildings that needed major renovations. But because some of the buildings were well built or had historic significance, the district decided to renovate instead of tear down.

Because President Obama has used the stimulus package to push for green renovations, "the stimulus has changed the conversation to, 'What is the right thing to do, and

how can we be more efficient,'" says Schmidt.

Updating an older building using green strategies usually is more extensive than other renovations. Districts that have committed to

LEED or green renovations already have committed to major energy efficient renovations, and already would have planned to replace

major systems such as heating and cooling and electrical, Schmidt says. Many schools from the early part of the 20th century have features such as large glass windows and heating and cooling systems that let in outside air—features that are standard in most green designs today.

MORE MONEY FOR CONSTRUCTION

Numerous funds are available for school renovations under the Recovery Act, and the U.S. Department of Education is not the only source for construction funds. Schools also are eligible for the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant program ad-

About the Photos

Photos for this special report were provided by ASBJ's sister publication, *Learning By Design*, an annual guide to school architecture. For more information and to nominate your school, visit www.learningbydesign.biz.

ministered by the U.S. Department of Energy and a program for grants and loans to rural communities through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Districts already have begun to apply for the Build America Bonds, which consist of several types of construction projects including schools. Over the next two years, state

and local governments may issue up to \$22 billion for Qualified School Construction Bonds—tax credits to use for building, renovating, and repairing school facilities, or purchasing land to build new schools. And the stimulus package doubles funding for the existing Qualified Zone Academy Bonds (QZAB) program. School districts may use QZABs for renovations and repairs, new technology, developing challenging course materials, and professional development.

The districts that passed bonds in November 2008 are in the best position to apply for Recovery Act funds. The stimulus funds so far have favored “shovel ready” projects, those that have received voter approval for bonds and already may be in the design phase, says Judy Marks, the associate director of the National Clearinghouse on Educational Facilities.

With a goal and money in hand, it’s tempting to start planning the project. And while it’s important that districts interested in the stimulus money apply for grants and tax credits quickly, planning is a crucial step to ensure a project will be the right choice for years to come.

“If somebody hands you a package of money, it’s tempting to spend it,” Robertson says. But first, districts must start the planning process by evaluating the existing buildings and figuring out exactly what type of space is needed.

“This kind of planning does not have to take months: It can take weeks if you are intent on doing it and making good decisions,” she says.

Further, Ramsey says the construction market may be heading for a recovery, and districts that focus on planning now will be better able to meet their needs in coming years.

“The key thing now is positioning yourself for recovery,” he says. “We keep preaching, ‘It’s gonna happen.’” ■

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A strong maintenance program can lead to savings—and achievement

Larry Williams believes that facilities maintenance in Texas’ fast-growing Lewisville Independent School District is directly tied to the district’s academic achievement. Taking care of requests quickly—and finding problems before others notice—gives teachers and administrators more time to focus on student learning.

“We allow the curriculum and teaching staff to do their jobs and not have to worry about the building,” says Williams, Lewisville’s assistant superintendent for facilities and construction.

In tight budget times, and often in normal budget cycles, facilities maintenance is one of the first items cut, even though facilities managers have repeatedly warned that deferring routine maintenance will lead to bigger and more expensive problems later on and may disrupt students and teachers.

“When maintenance is not taken care of, the consequence is ‘pay me now or pay me later,’” says Sue Robertson, an educational facility planner and president of the Planning Alliance in New Orleans. “It’s essential to implement a maintenance plan that will prevent problems from happening.”

Lewisville, a rural-turned-suburban area north of Dallas, has its money woes as well. Maintenance budgets there have stagnated in recent years as more schools have opened and duties have grown.

To stave off major repairs and counter a backlog of work orders, Williams decided to be proactive. He set up a customer-service oriented process to inspect and repair buildings as quickly as possible.

The first step is a “classroom blitz,” where the facilities staff inspects each of the district’s 4,000 classrooms and writes work orders for any needed repairs. Last year, the team wrote more than 3,100 work orders that were completed before the school year began, avoiding disruptions during the school year.

The facilities staff also asked each principal to list the top five repairs needed at their school, then reviewed and priced each item on the lists. Last year, 146 out of 197 requests were approved and funded.

Principals also receive a 10-point survey each month to critique the facilities departments’ service. If a principal gives a score of less than seven out of 10 on the survey, Williams meets with them to better identify problems.

Districts can easily replicate the plan with their existing staff, and it should not cost anything, Williams says. If the plan is done well, it will save districts money.

“We are seeing less expensive repairs because we have identified things early on,” he says.

For more on Lewisville’s award-winning facilities maintenance plan, register for our webinar on facilities maintenance and renovations, to be held Sept. 24 in partnership with the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO).