



Tom Banse/Northwest News Network

The Washington Legislature approved a major funding boost to strengthen older school buildings so they don't collapse in an earthquake.

Washington Legislature OKs funds for earthquake retrofits for older school buildings

By TOM BANSE
Northwest News Network

An effort to jump-start the pace of earthquake retrofits to vulnerable, older school buildings in Washington state has passed the Legislature unanimously.

The Evergreen State has lagged behind other West Coast states and provinces in reinforcing schools to withstand strong shaking.

A report from the Washington State Department of Natural Resources last year said tens of thousands of Washington students attend class in buildings at high risk of collapse in an earthquake. Thousands more youngsters go to low-lying schools in the coastal tsunami zone.

DaleAnn Baker, a Stanwood, Washington, parent and PTA volunteer, was among a corps of citizen activists who successfully lobbied the Legislature to more than double state spending for earthquake retrofits, or in some cases, to pay most of the cost to relocate a public school out of the tsunami zone.

"The amount of funding is significant and this is great," Baker said in an interview. "It is really showing that the Legislature wants to make a commitment to this effort."

Baker said her journey into activism began a few years ago when she realized the elementary school where she sends her two children was built in 1956, long before modern seismic safety codes. "How is it acceptable to require kids to attend school in a building that may collapse during an earthquake?" the aerospace engineer asked herself and others.

On Wednesday, the Washington Senate voted 49 to 0 to pass a supplemental state construction budget that includes \$100 million for earthquake and tsunami safety upgrades to the most vulnerable schools statewide. The action to send the budget bill to the governor's desk followed a similarly lopsided 98 to 0 state House vote the day before. The new funding for school seismic safety retrofits represents a 150% increase over last year's level and a nearly eightfold increase from just three years ago.

The Oregon Legislature way back in 2005 created a school seismic retrofit grant program on the scale now being launched from Olympia. The provincial government of British Columbia started a seismic mitigation program for schools

in 2004 and has shelled out more than \$1.9 billion for that since then.

Baker said a challenge ahead is to convince future Legislatures to maintain Washington state's funding at about \$100 million every two years.

"It will take a while to do this," Baker noted. "It is going to take 10, 15, 20 years to properly do seismic updates to all of our school buildings in our state."

Earlier this year, a bipartisan group of Washington senators proposed a statewide voter referendum to authorize a \$500 million bond sale to pay for school seismic retrofits over the next decade. But by late February, a lead budget writer, state Sen. David Frockt, said the earthquake safety spending could fit into the regular school construction budget, which eliminated an unnecessary risk of a bond measure failure.

Frockt said the money for this purpose now will come from regular state borrowing, which is repaid with general tax collections in the future.

"Providing safe places for children to learn is one of the state's most serious responsibilities," the Seattle Democrat said in a statement. "The risk of an earthquake or tsunami may seem small at any particular place and time, but multiplied by all the communities in potentially geologically active areas across our state, this problem is urgent."

Frockt was the lead sponsor this winter on a separate school seismic safety policy bill, which establishes how Washington schools are prioritized for seismic retrofit funding and how much of the cost the state will shoulder. Qualifying K-12 schools must have been built before 1998. Local school districts can count on state and federal funding to cover at least two-thirds of an earthquake safety project's cost.

Other people and groups that got involved in pressing the Legislature for bold action this year included the Washington State PTA, Northwest Progressive Institute, various school district superintendents and a persistent former state representative from the Olympic Peninsula named Jim Buck.

"This is a good first step," Buck said by email after the state construction budget's final passage. "Let's make sure every mom and pop in the state understands it is now their job to hold their electeds responsible for fixing these schools."

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Boosters: 'There's this sense of humble anticipation'

Continued from Page A1

Next week marks the second anniversary of the first recorded COVID-19 case in Clatsop County.

The county had recorded 4,550 virus cases as of Monday, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

The Public Health Department said that the availability of at-home testing means that the official count probably does not capture the true total. Some people who got a positive result in private may not have reported it.

Margo Lalich, the county's interim public health director, said the county's vaccination campaign has been successful. While the health department did not expect that everyone would get vaccinated, the county has among the highest vaccination rates in the state: 73.6%.

"The pandemic is not over," she said. "While guidance and policies are always changing, we're still in a pandemic, and we're learning how to live with this virus circulating in the community."

A new concern is how to navigate a world where wearing masks as a precaution against the virus is voluntary.

Businesses have recently reached out

to Lalich about masking. She heard stories of employees dealing with customers who resented the mask mandate, especially customers who visited from places without mandates. Some people became angry and belligerent and verbally abused employees who were trying to provide customer service.

Lalich hopes the voluntary approach comes to be seen as part of the community's diversity.

"We don't know everyone's story, and there may be a reason why somebody needs to wear a mask," she said, "and so don't assume you know — just allow them to wear a mask as they're choosing to wear a mask, just like people do all kinds of things with how they present to society and it's their choice to do so."

Although the pandemic is moving into a new phase, Lalich said it is important to remember: "We've been here before. We were here before delta ... We removed the masks, everyone got together, and then we went through two surges after that."

The world is experiencing a period of calm. "And yet we also don't know what may be," she said. "And so there's this sense of humble anticipation."

Geografo: 'I am thankful I explored the road less taken'

Continued from Page A1

Geografo, who taught at a Catholic school in the Philippines, said the transition in culture and education style has been drastic, but she hopes to learn as much from the students as they learn from her science classes.

She found her passion for teaching at the high school level because teenagers are unafraid to challenge belief systems, she said.

The exchange program will allow her to stay in the United States for up to five years. Taking what she can during that period, Geografo plans to implement many of the lessons and strategies back in her classroom in the Philippines.

At some point, she also hopes to connect the students in Knappa with her students back home. She thinks the exchange of different cultures and ideas would be beneficial for both sides.

While moving countries and embracing a new culture has been a substantial change in her life, Geografo credits the community in Knappa for helping her feel at home in just a few months.

Whether it's the small gifts or just a sense of hospitality, the simple acts of kindness have meant the most, she said.

"I didn't ever imagine I would be welcomed this much," Geografo said. "... This is such a nice community. I am thankful I explored the road less taken."

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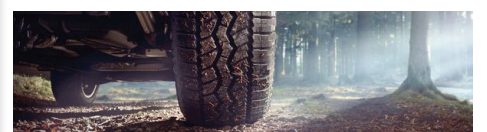
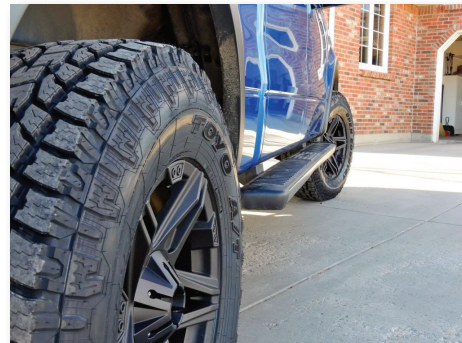
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