

South Tahoe schools make list for seismic retrofits

By Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

More than 200 school buildings in the Sacramento region appear on a state list of facilities with potentially dangerous seismic hazards, according to California Watch, a nonprofit news agency.

Local districts have spent tens of millions of dollars to repair buildings on the decade-old list, produced by the Division of the State Architect, though large earthquakes happen less frequently in Yolo, Placer, El Dorado and Sacramento counties than elsewhere in California.

Sacramento City Unified and San Juan Unified school districts had a combined 150 school buildings on the list, which logged buildings constructed before 1978 using certain materials prone to earthquake damage.

The city of Sacramento itself has no major known faults running beneath it. However, several faults within 30 miles are capable of producing large earthquakes, said Bill Bryant, a senior engineering geologist for the California Department of Conservation.

A magnitude 6.5 earthquake near Winters in 1892 was felt with high intensity in Sacramento.

Sacramento City Unified and San Juan Unified passed several construction bond measures about 15 years ago and devoted some of the proceeds to earthquake retrofitting. Officials at both districts say work has been completed at dozens of buildings.

"All buildings older than 25 years have been retrofitted," said Sacramento City Unified spokesman Gabe Ross.

About 15 buildings at Elk Grove Unified, the region's largest district, made the at-risk list.

"At the schools on that list, we've done about \$40 million worth of work," said Robert Pierce, the district's associate superintendent for facilities and planning, adding that all district buildings now could likely withstand a quake.

Elsewhere in the region, fewer schools appear to have structural problems, but the threat of a large earthquake directly underfoot is higher.

The Lake Tahoe area sees the most earthquakes in the region, particularly Alpine County, south of the lake. Several hundred earthquakes have struck there in the past 40 years, most of them minor, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Bijou Community Elementary in the Lake Tahoe Unified School District was cited on the state's list of schools potentially at most risk from an earthquake. South Tahoe Middle School appeared on a list of high-priority seismic projects.

Workers retrofitted Bijou in 2000 and performed three separate retrofits at Tahoe Middle in subsequent years, said Steve Morales, director of facilities at Lake Tahoe Unified. Other schools have also been extensively renovated with bond money.

Work is still ongoing, Morales said, adding that past projects "were designed to offset catastrophic failures in the buildings. The upgrades do not bring the facilities up to the current building code."