

Vancouver Courier
December 17, 2003

Schools get quake study money

By Naoibh O'Connor-Staff writer

The first phase of a probe into the safety of B.C. schools in an earthquake is expected to kick off this January thanks to a \$150,000 cash infusion.

The funding, from the federal department of Western Economic Diversification, was promised by Vancouver-Quadra MP Stephen Owen during a meeting with representatives of an engineering association and a group called Families for School Seismic Safety on Monday.

The goal is to rank the province's schools according to which pose the most danger, and determine how to fix them in the most economical fashion.

The entire project, to be undertaken by the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C. and UBC researchers, is expected to cost \$760,000, with the remaining funding coming from provincial, federal and industry sources.

The association hopes to secure \$160,000 from Education Minister Christy Clark, who indicated a comprehensive seismic risk assessment would be completed within the year.

Andrew Mill, chair of the association's two-year-old seismic risk task force, said the professional organization learned a lesson from the leaky condo debacle-to more actively share its knowledge when it can provide solutions to problems affecting the public.

The task force is working with UBC experts to design a method for assessing earthquake risk, using up-to-date information about the potential for damage to older buildings hit by earthquakes.

One of things researchers will do is create mock-ups of masonry construction, commonly used in old schools, and test its ability to withstand shaking. While the building code offers ways to mitigate earthquake risk in new buildings, it does little to assess the threat in older masonry buildings, Mill said.

Researchers will also collect information about seismic concerns from school districts and add it to a database, to better predict damage and death and injury rates.

"We're not trying to reinvent the wheel. We're just using the existing data, using some new research, and building a better mousetrap," said Mill.

Earlier estimates suggest it would take \$1.5 billion to upgrade all the schools in the

province, Mill said, but the actual figure may drop to \$400 or \$500 million given new technologies and better risk assessment.

He pointed out a cost-benefit analysis will indicate how upgrading buildings will save the federal and provincial governments money over the long term, and look at how efforts to mitigate earthquake risk compare statistically to things like children wearing seat belts.

"Mr. Owen said [Monday] some of the most difficult money to get out of government is money that's preventative in nature-whether you're talking about floods or fire," he said. "We want to demonstrate very clearly, across the province, why it's important to spend that preventative money, why it's a wise investment. The reason we're optimistic is because we have the science behind us."