

SFGate.com

[Print This Article](#)[Back to advertisement](#) | [your ad here](#)

Article

SFGate.com

School's costs skyrocket after labor pact

Phillip Matier, Andrew Ross

Wednesday, April 28, 2004



If you want to know how school bond money goes up in smoke, look no further than the planned fix-up of the World War II-era Burckhalter Elementary School in East Oakland.

For the past three years, with the classrooms in sore need of repair, Burckhalter's 127 students have been housed in eight portables that encircle the playground at the school off the Edwards Street exit of Interstate 580.

For a while, it looked like the school might just die.

State administrator Randy Ward, who was trying to cope with the Oakland Unified School District's troubled finances and shrinking enrollments, put Burckhalter on a hit list of 13 elementary schools to be considered for possible closure at the end of the school year.

But with support from parents and teachers, Burckhalter survived. Soon the district was green-lighting plans to bring the classrooms up to snuff, complete with new windows, floors, rest rooms, seismic upgrades and the like.

Money for the rehab would come from Measure A, a \$300 million bond approved by Oakland voters in March 2000.

A call for bids went out, and a San Rafael firm that specializes in school construction -- M.A. Davies Builders -- came in with the low estimate of \$1.8 million, beating out seven competitors.

But no sooner did M.A. Davies get a tentative nod than things took an unexpected turn.

Before a final deal was signed, the school district announced that -- after years of on-again, off-again talks -- it had signed a breakthrough labor pact with Alameda County's trade unions.

The pact is supposed to ensure labor peace in future school construction projects. It sets local hiring goals, encourages job apprenticeships and requires that a percentage of workers be hired out of the local union halls.

It was a pact that came with a lot of political juice -- with folks like Oakland City Council President Ignacio De La Fuente, himself a union rep, exerting pressure to get the Port of Oakland, the schools and others to sign on.

But as a result of the labor pact, the school district decided to rebid the Burckhalter contract -- and that, it turns out, came with a hefty price tag.

This time, there were only three companies in the running, and the lowest bid, from Albay Construction of Contra Costa County, was just over \$2.2 million.

That's \$437,000 more than original bid submitted by M.A. Davies just weeks earlier. And ironically, \$437,000 is about what Ward will save for each of the five elementary schools that Oakland will close next year.

Of course, \$437,000 would also go a long way toward providing more paper, pencils and other materials -- something Burckhalter teachers, aides and others told us were in chronic short supply, forcing them to cover many of the costs out of pocket.

School district officials admit they are disappointed by the sharp increase, and are frankly at a loss to explain it.

"I was hoping the price didn't appreciably go up," said Tim White, head of facilities management for the school district.

Likewise, De La Fuente said he had no reason to believe the labor agreement was going to drive up the price.

So what's behind the added cost? After all, M.A. Davies, while not a union business, was required under the original deal to pay the same prevailing wages as the new contract.

Executives at M.A. Davies wouldn't talk for the record, but one rep told us the labor pact required so much additional paperwork that the company would have needed a full-time manager just to stay on top of the Burckhalter contract had it chosen to rebid the job.

But a project manager for Albay, whose own bid went up nearly \$167,000 the second time around, discounted the idea of additional paperwork -- saying it's pretty routine for any public works project.

Instead, the manager cited the reduced number of bids the second time (because many contractors had already lined up summer work) and the increased costs of materials.

Who's coming out ahead in all this isn't quite clear. But it's probably not the kids.

Alien resident: San Francisco Board of Supervisors President Matt Gonzalez is reaching out to find Latinos to serve on city commissions -- in fact, he's reached all the way out to Oakland.

It turns out that Luis Granados, whom Gonzalez supposedly was preparing to nominate to the San Francisco Planning Commission, is an Oakland resident.

Apparently, the subject of Granados' residency -- or lack of it -- never came up when he first met with Gonzalez to discuss the nomination.

"I didn't realize it was an issue," said Granados, executive director of the San Francisco nonprofit Mission Economic Development Association.

Granados, who bought a house in Oakland three years ago, said he and his family are "seriously considering" moving to San Francisco.

"I'm very committed to this (planning) work, and will make a decision with my family in the next couple of days," he said.

For its part, Gonzalez's crew says talk of Granados getting the nomination is premature.

"He's certainly being considered . . . but nothing official has happened at all," said Amy Laitinen, the supervisor's chief of staff.

In any event, Granados said that if his nomination does go forward, "I would make sure I met all the legal standards of a San Francisco residence."

Given San Francisco's tight housing market, does Granados have a place in mind?

"Fortunately, I think there are some alternatives that are available," he said without elaborating.

Buckle up: Talk about bad luck: A San Francisco city worker who checked out a fully gassed city car over the weekend last month is in hot water for racking up an extra 320 miles for his personal use.

How did he get caught?

On the Monday morning after the weekend, he ran out of gas.

On the Bay Bridge, of all places.

During rush hour.

Causing a nice little backup.

That even made the morning news.

It also triggered an investigation that has resulted in our weekend driver from the Department of Social Services facing possible disciplinary action -- and having to repay the city 36 cents a mile.

Chronicle columnists Phillip Matier and Andrew Ross appear Sundays, Mondays and Wednesdays. They can also be heard on KGO Radio on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Phil Matier can be seen regularly on KRON-TV. Got a tip? Call them at (415) 777-8815 or e-mail them at matierandross@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/04/28/BAGR86C7JN1.DTL>

This article appeared on page **B - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

© 2010 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)