

Building schools

Some districts sidestep the law

Tribune Editorial

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School construction is a big-ticket item in Utah, where education costs taxpayers more than any other expenditure in the state budget. So we're concerned about a Legislative Auditor General's report that shows some school districts don't always stick to competitive bidding as required by state law and some are sloppy in monitoring contractors and subcontractors.

The audit looked at all the 51 school buildings built in 2006, 2007 and 2008 in 21 of Utah's 40 school districts. The projects cost a total of nearly \$661 million. Many millions more will be spent in coming years, most notably on the west side of Salt Lake County, where a growing population of households with children will demand more school buildings.

So the audit should be a heads-up to district and state education officials and to the taxpaying public, who should demand strict adherence to the law to make every tax dollar count.

According to Utah Code, school districts should use competitive bidding for all new construction projects "if the total estimated accumulative building project cost exceeds \$80,000." Obviously, that includes architectural services.

Nonetheless, auditors found that 43 percent of the districts did not follow the law when awarding contracts for architectural services, ultimately raising building costs.

Some districts failed to ask for architectural bids for a new project, used an architectural firm they had used in the past, used an architectural firm pre-qualified under outdated criteria, or used an architectural firm able to bundle several projects.

The auditors also pointed out that bid-selection committees should include members qualified in architecture or engineering. Three district committees did not, and several did a poor job of overseeing subcontractors.

The worst example of oversight and compliance is Wasatch School District, facing cost overruns of more than \$15 million on the high school it is building. The school will cost \$193 per square foot, compared to an average of \$154 for the seven high schools built during the same period.

The district's selection committee awarded the design contract to a company it had worked with before, although the firm had much less experience in designing high schools than other bidders.

When school districts are spending so much taxpayer money, they have a duty to follow the law and keep costs under control.