

SchoolConstructionNEWS

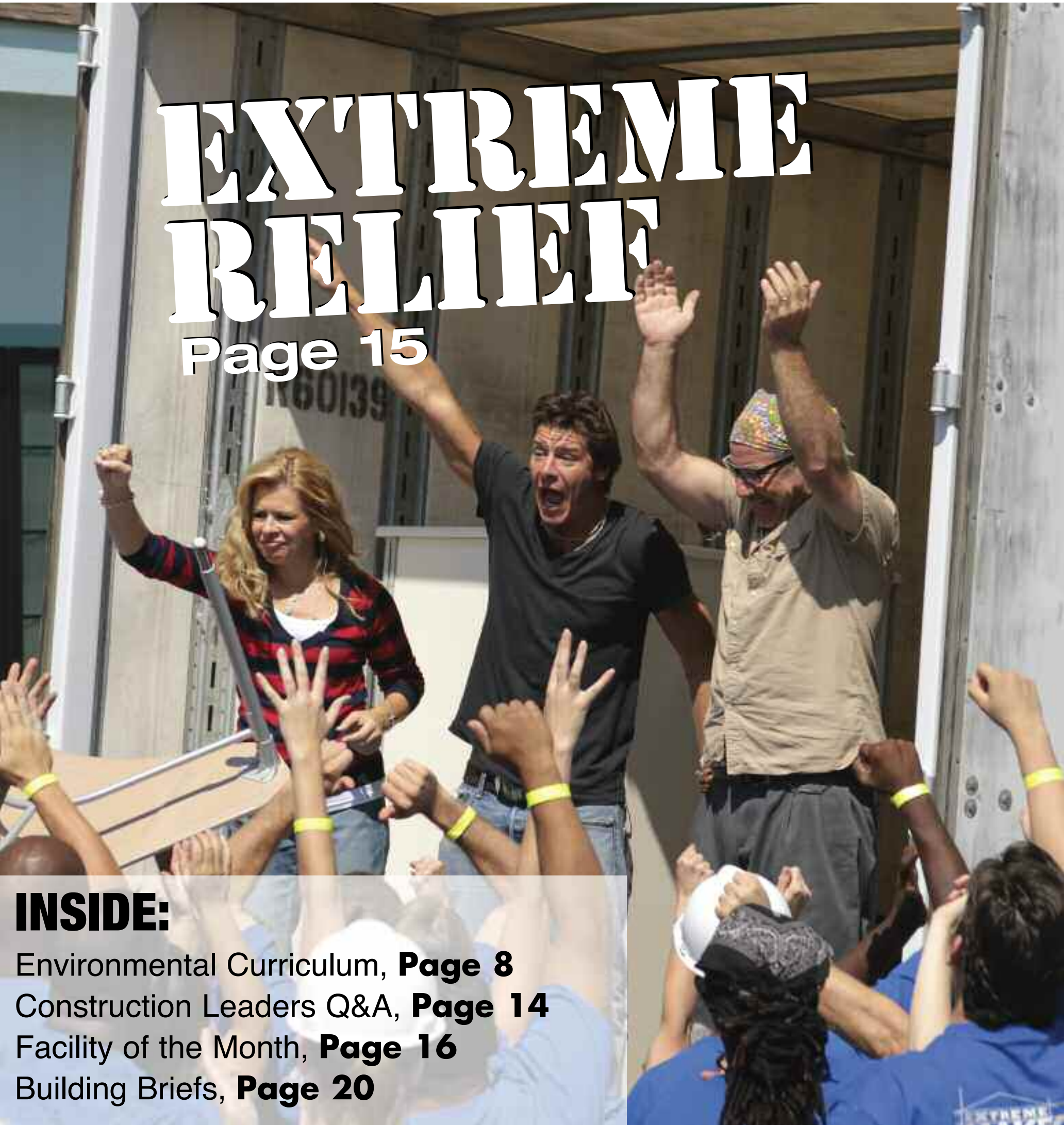
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New Realities: It's Time to Update Your Facility Master Plan

By William DeJong

It has been three years since the economy entered a major downturn. What many of us hoped was an anomaly has become our new reality. I'm not being pessimistic; I'm being realistic. Life is very different now, and we have to find a way to deal with the economy while still maintaining our school facilities.

From 2000 to 2008, we experienced major growth in school construction.

Student enrollment increased, and buildings were replaced or renovated. School construction costs escalated as well. Since 2008, the economy has declined, which has significantly impacted funding for school maintenance and construction. However, indicators suggest the economy is beginning to stabilize. This is not to say we will return to where we left off in 2008.

Rather, it is more like pushing the reset button, and 2011 becomes the new reality. With this being said, the following factors are driving the need to update previous facility master plans, or in some cases, to start over.

Economy. The prices used to estimate construction costs in the past need to be updated, as does the tax base, interest rates, and bond costs. There may be opportunities through government-backed bonds or new infrastructure resources to finance the construction, rehabilitation, or repair of public school facilities, or for the acquisition of land where a school will be built.

Enrollment. Currently, most districts are experiencing declining enrollment or much slower growth. This



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fact, coupled with major disruptions in the housing market, means it's time to update enrollment projections. And, it's time to take advantage of state-of-the-art planning tools, such as Geographic Information Systems.

AYP/Charter Schools/Restructuring. Major shifts in school reform impact the delivery of educational programs. Some low-performing schools will be closed, and more "choice" school will be developed in the public arena. This affects "traditional" schools, feeder patterns, and student transportation, especially in our cities.

Charter Schools. There is an increasing shift toward the acceptance of charter schools. Not only does this impact each state's efforts to provide and support the charter school infrastructure, it also impacts the number and type of public schools that will be needed.

Green. Most facility plans were developed prior to the major push for energy conservation, sustainability, and high-performance facilities. Therefore, plans must be updated with green solutions in mind because energy cost won't decrease.

Technology. Our previous focus was on infrastructure and devices. Now the focus has shifted to online learning, which has already taken hold at the university level and will affect the need for and type of school facilities in the next decade.

Deferred Maintenance. The backlog has already begun. We can't let the neglect of the 1980s happen again.

Doing More with Less. The financial reality is clear: we must do more with fewer resources. Unfortunately, this is not likely to change any time soon. Therefore, we must come up with more creative and innovative plans to get the job done.

Partnerships. When resources become scarce, collaboration with community entities is key. Updated facility plans should embrace new forms of public-public partnerships, as well as public-private partnerships.

Strategic Focus. Where can we get the biggest bang for our buck? How can we protect and leverage our previous investments, while pinpointing new solutions that will provide the greatest benefits? School districts must be more strategic in the facility planning process.

Each community has unique issues. This may include business closures, an early childhood program that lost funding, shifts in immigration patterns, or the implementation of new program innovation. A proactive facility plan will account for each issue and prepare the district accordingly.

Life is very different now, and we have to find a way to deal with the economy while still maintaining our school facilities.

Now is the time to take action. For the past three years, many school districts have been reactive and pessimistic. To be proactive and positive, they must deal with the realities outlined above.

Now is the time to update facility master plans. Now is the time to build schools. Interest rates are low, construction costs have decreased, and new construction projects will become major stimulators for each local economy. If districts are not going to move on these projects right now, they need to at least get themselves positioned. It is time to seriously examine the factors mentioned above to come up with new and better ideas that meet the facility needs of our school districts.

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Academic PPP to Convert Methane to Electricity

GASTON, S.C. — Clemson University is partnering with Santee Cooper, Environmental Fabrics Inc. to construct a new renewable energy facility that will generate power from methane gas.

Burrows Hall Renewable Energy Facility will be the first of its kind in South Carolina, capturing methane gas at a Williamsburg County farm and deliver it to electric customers on the Santee Cooper system.

The 180-kilowatt building — the result of a public-private partnership — is expected to begin generating renewable energy for the grid early this summer.

Other partners involved in the project are Santee Electric Cooperative, the South Carolina Energy Office and the South Carolina Department of Agriculture.

The idea was first proposed by Duffy Connolly, owner of Burrows Hall Farm, who approached Santee Cooper four years ago with an idea of building an anaerobic digester that could capture the methane gas produced naturally on his hog farm.



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