

Building a stronger future

Lawmaker, group lead efforts to fund safe rooms in schools

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OKLAHOMA CITY – Two fundraising efforts – one public, the other private – could generate millions of dollars for Oklahoma public schools to build safe rooms.

Three months after tornadoes ravaged central Oklahoma, an effort by the group Shelter Oklahoma Schools and the work of a state representative from Rush Springs could bring more safe rooms to public schools.

In a posting on its website, Shelter Oklahoma Schools said it had raised about \$1 million in donations for safe rooms.

“We want to help rebuild what was taken so quickly from us,” the group said on its website. “Shelter Oklahoma Schools was created with the purpose of providing storm shelters in and around Oklahoma schools and communities. We’ve started this fund not only to help people now, but for generations to come.”

Organizers said the fund would work with local schools and municipalities to build or fortify storm shelters across the state.

“The children at Plaza Towers Elementary did not have to perish,” the group said on its website. “Nothing we can do will bring them back or console their loved ones who remain, but we can try to stop this from ever happening again. Help us build a stronger future for our children for years to come. Shelter Oklahoma Schools was created with the purpose of providing storm shelters in and around Oklahoma schools and communities.”

The group’s fundraising effort starts at the same time that state Rep. Joe Dorman, D-Rush Springs, is launching an initiative petition to amend the Oklahoma Constitution and create a \$500 million bond issue to fund safe room construction at public schools. This spring, just as the Legislature adjourned, Dorman called on lawmakers to create a \$500 million bond fund for safe rooms. Legislative leaders, however, scuttled the idea.

On Wednesday, Dorman said his pro-



Gary Ambruster, principal and architect with MA+ Architecture, demonstrates a feature of a safe room at the new Canyon Ridge Intermediate School at 3600 S. Sara Rd. in Oklahoma City.

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posal would leverage money from the state’s franchise tax to pay the debt service on the bond issue.

“We estimate it would be about \$30 million a year,” he said. “That would cover the \$500 million bond.”

Dorman said the state funds could also be used to leverage about \$2 billion in federal disaster recovery funds.

“Doing that would provide a huge resource for our public schools,” Dorman said. “Right now they are pretty much tapped out on bonding capacity. The state needs to step up and provide the resources to help keep our children safe.”

In Moore, school officials said four new elementary schools set to be built would include safe rooms. Two of those schools would replace Briarwood Elementary and Plaza Towers Elementary, both of which were destroyed by tornadoes in May.

Moore Public Schools Superintendent Robert Romines said school officials asked architects to reconfigure designs for two other schools on the drawing board to include safe rooms.

Dorman said Oklahomans would support both efforts to protect schoolchildren. “I don’t think there will be a problem getting people interested or getting enough signatures,” he said.

State law requires about 170,000 valid signatures before an initiative petition can be placed for a public vote. Dorman said organizers of the drive would use volun-

teers to circulate the petition. He said the goal was to gather about 180,000 in case some signatures were contested.

“I think the people support this,” he said. “We’re going this route because I have no faith in the legislative process to provide bond funds for safe rooms.”

At least one school group said it supported new ways to fund safe room construction. Steve Crawford, executive director of the Cooperative Council Oklahoma School Administration, said officials were reviewing ideas that would provide new funding for school shelters.

“We’re interested in any ways to get funding to schools for shelters,” Crawford said. “We wouldn’t be opposed to the idea.”

But Crawford said the decisions about safe rooms for schools would be made mostly at the local level.

“Those are going to be local issues, decided at the local level,” he said. “But I believe there is a heightened awareness of the need for everyone to have better protection.”

Dorman’s call for \$500 million in bonds, he said, is a big step in the right direction.

“I’ve seen numbers that, to cover all the schools are quite a bit larger than that,” he said. “But \$500 million is a good step in the right direction. You might be able to do quite a bit of improvement in the area of protection with that.”