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October 11, 2010

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Work on flooded school detailed

by Bailey Darrow

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BAXTER -- Baxter Elementary students were allowed to return to their home school two weeks ago, but not without some extensive electrical repairs.

Gary Loftis of Maffett Loftis engineering addressed the Putnam County School Board recently to offer a detailed explanation of the work that has been done on the school and left the board with a few recommendations for further improvements.

Heavy rains flooded the crawl space of the school on Aug. 18, causing a significant short in what has been called "criminal" wiring of the building.

Loftis said that when the water filled the crawl space an electric arc likely formed, melting cables and charring electrical housings. The meltdown led to an electric charge of water pipes and wiring throughout much of the building and even charged an electric fence.

As the problems were corrected, multiple safety hazards were found and resolved leading to four more weeks of work by state fire marshal officials, state electrical inspectors, electrical contractors and maintenance workers.

With all safety concerns resolved, Loftis suggested four items for consideration: Replacement of an old, obsolete electrical panel in the school's gym, replacement of electrical conductors, the replacement of a series of 100 amp wires connected to a 125 amp breaker, and the designation of space for storing maintenance items so that the areas where electrical equipment is stored remained clean and free of clutter.

"It was recommended that we complete those in the next six months and that is absolutely our intention," Director of Schools Kathleen Airhart said.

Loftis said that none of these items were against electrical code and were not immediate safety concerns, but because some of the building's electrical system dates back to the 60's, upgrades would be beneficial.

"All of those things are not necessarily safety issues but bringing the building more up in modern times with electrical wiring," Airhart said.

The repairs will be completed by the school system's maintenance department, Airhart said.

The school board also approved an indoor air quality assessment of Baxter Elementary. Board Chair Eric Brown said that a couple of teachers and parents had approached him about having allergy problems in certain areas of the building and expressing concern over air quality after the building had been shut up without ventilation for some time.

The air quality assessment will check for abnormalities in the air, test for possible concerns with moisture and leaks and test for the presence of mold. Once the assessment is complete, Gobbell Hays, the company approved to do the work, will offer a maintenance and repair plan to resolve any issues.

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