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- **School districts to get cash for construction**

South Carolina's poorest school districts as well as districts with shovel-ready school construction projects could soon get a boost of federal cash.

Both the House and Senate approved a bill Thursday, authorizing the state to dole out \$131 million in federal stimulus funds for the construction of new schools and for school repair/renovation projects.

The money is not a handout. School districts would have to repay the 0 percent interest bonds. In turn, bondholders would receive a tax credit.

In some cases, school districts will need to hold bond referendums to gain voters' approval, said Scott Price of the S.C. School Boards Association.

The money is split into two pots. Sixty percent of the \$131 million would flow to the state's poorest school districts that have construction needs.

The federal government is defining "poorest" by dividing the assessed value of property within a school district by the number of pupils in that district.

Topping that list is Clarendon 3, Lexington 4, Dillon 3, Barnwell 19 and Dillon 1, according to the state Department of Education.

The remainder of funds would go to school districts with construction projects ready to go but that are having difficulty selling bonds because of the sluggish market.

That's been the case in Dillon County where voters overwhelmingly passed a bond referendum last year. But because of the down market, district leaders have been unable to

sell bonds. That's why J.V. Martin Jr. High School, where a portion of the school is more than 100 years old, has not been rebuilt.

"The way the bond market has been, it's been hard for anyone to sell (school construction) bonds right now," said Betsey Carpenter, the state Department of Education's deputy superintendent for innovation and support. "The idea behind this money is to get these projects going."

It's uncertain how many school districts will receive money. Much of that depends on who applies, how much money they need and the types of projects, said Scott Price, attorney for the S.C. School Boards Association.

The bill is a two-year bill, meaning there's \$131 million that school districts are eligible for this year and another \$131 million for next year, '09-'10, as well.

The bill now heads to the governor's desk.