

School summer maintenance is more demanding due to COVID-19

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Usually, Steve Morgan's job gets easier when the students are not around during the summer.

However, the demand on Del Norte Unified School District's director of facilities and construction and his crews was more challenging this year since students were sent home in March because of the COVID-19 shutdown.

And although classes will resume in the district next Monday, Aug. 31, with only a distance-learning option, preparations for on campus classes continued throughout the summer.

Typically, Morgan has a to-do list of 12 or more pages to keep his crews busy through the summer. But this year the tasks of his 27 custodians, eight maintenance specialist and five groundskeepers were even more complex with the added burden of safety measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

"DNUSD personnel have had to deal with those things that also have taken some of them away from work during COVID-19, such as child care, elder care and other COVID-19 health care priorities," he said.

To prepare the campuses for an eventual return of students, Morgan had to craft an action plan that would pass scrutiny by both the state's and Del Norte County's Departments of Public Health.

Custodian shifts were split into night and day crews to clean and disinfect over 500,000 square feet of interior facilities.

A large task by his maintenance specialists accomplishes both COVID-19 precautions and scheduled upkeep — the annual cleaning of the condensing coils and replacement of all the filters in each HVAC unit atop district buildings. That's between 40 and 50 at Del Norte High School alone, with another 20 to 30 at 15 other campuses and the district office.

Then beyond the annual checklist, are the big-ticket items contractors are brought in to accomplish. The DNUSD Board of Trustees approved about \$450,000 to replace failing HVAC units — 14 at Redwood and

nine at Smith River. Usually, HVAC units last 15-20 years. The ones replaced were 23 and 27 years old, having considerably outlasted their life expectancy, Morgan said.

Trustees approved another \$350,000 to replace six failed, smaller BARD HAVC units at Bess Maxwell and Pine Grove.

Another big project Morgan and crew tackled was replacement of fire alarms at Pine Grove school. Fire alarms at two other schools — Joe Hamilton and Smith River — were replaced last year and Crescent Elk was two years ago. Next year, Margaret Keating and Sunset High School will be next in line to get their alarms updated.

“The Facilities and Construction Department has successfully completed many Summer 2020 and COVID-19 projects, and are working hard to successfully re-open the school facilities for students and staff in the next few weeks,” Morgan said.

He said he is proud of the way his crews have accomplished so much under such scrutiny.

“Ninety-nine percent of them are really good people who really care about the kids and cleaning up after everybody. It’s a challenging job. They do a good job and they don’t complain,” Morgan said. “Now with COVID-19, now they have to be even more diligent. Even before COVID-19 they were diligent because of flu season. Same worries. Germs and viruses. I’m so grateful to work with this team. They’re hard working and they care.”