

Waste and Abuse in Public School Roofing Projects

Opening Statement

by

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Chair

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Good morning.

Today, the State Commission of Investigation opens the first of two days of public hearings into waste and abuse in public school roofing projects in New Jersey.

The Commission and its staff began looking into this area more than 18 months ago based upon preliminary information suggesting a variety of abuses, including over-billing, contractor collusion and shoddy workmanship. Our ensuing investigation was statewide in scope. Scores of individuals were interviewed and thousands of documents were examined. Numerous technical questions required the retention of outside experts familiar with the complexities of public-sector roofing.

The Commission's findings, which will be thoroughly aired in this public hearing, reveal a systematic breach of the public trust.

During these proceedings, witnesses will detail how millions of dollars have been wasted through unnecessarily costly roof replacement and construction projects on public schools throughout New Jersey.

You will hear how unscrupulous consultants and manufacturers' sales representatives joined in a secret conspiracy to accomplish this rip-off and how they contrived to line their own pockets at taxpayer expense.

You will hear how the processes which govern public bidding and contracting have been subverted and manipulated by those bent on putting profit ahead of the public interest.

And you will hear how these abuses were sustained, in part, by the action, and inaction, of high-level school district officials — in some instances, even after they had been alerted to potential abuses.

Needless to say, these are serious matters. To put them in proper perspective as these hearings unfold, I would ask that you consider the following fundamental questions:

When we pay taxes, is it not unreasonable to expect that our money will be spent wisely and effectively, and in the public's best interest? The State of New Jersey is about to embark upon a multi-billion-dollar program to renovate and repair school facilities in many areas. A good deal of that money undoubtedly will be spent to repair and replace roof systems, which represent the single most expensive and integral pieces of a school's physical structure. Is it unreasonable to expect that this much-needed initiative be undertaken with a minimum of waste and a maximum of efficiency?

More importantly, when we send our children into a school building, shouldn't we be entitled to have confidence that their safety and well-being are not threatened by the very roof over their heads?

Ladies and gentlemen, the findings of this investigation — as well as the reforms the Commission will recommend at the conclusion of these hearings — should serve as a wake-up call to legislators, school administrators, taxpayers and parents alike.

Please call the first panel of witnesses.