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California agencies squabble over office mold

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Dehumidifiers hummed and air scrubbers buzzed next to cubicles draped in plastic Thursday on the eighth floor of the Board of Equalization building in downtown Sacramento.

The scene, prompted by water damage and mold concerns that arose after a water pipe burst Sunday, underscored how work at 450 N St. is again interrupted by the latest in a decade of problems to befall the building – and how two state agencies continue to squabble over what to do next.

Although the state has spent millions to fix everything from mold to leaking windows and unreliable elevators, several floors of the BOE headquarters have remained vacant as the tax-collecting agency and its landlord argue over the quality of some repairs.

"If something unsafe is identified, we always make sure it's safe before employees return," said Eric Lamoureux, spokesman for the Department of General Services, which owns the BOE building.

About 2,700 people work in the 24-story building, designed to house about 2,200. The agency is looking for office space to move about 500 employees and has \$5.7 million in the 2009-10 budget to do it.

The BOE's elected five-member board also told staff members to look for offices that could eventually house up to 3,000. It won't happen soon.

"Finding a place to go is a long process," said BOE spokeswoman Anita Gore. "It takes legislative and budgetary approval. But we've made our wishes known."

The BOE's 16-year-old headquarters is part of downtown Sacramento's skyline. Its exterior features more than 6,000 windows set in precast concrete.

Seven of those windows failed between 1999 and 2005, in some cases sending glass chunks crashing to the street. An investigation revealed that the gaskets around the windows leaked, which broke the windows and allowed water into the building.

The state spent \$12 million to fix the problem, part of the \$29 million paid out in recent years to handle the building's mold, water leaks and window failures.

In October 2007, the agency cleared the top three floors after it discovered mold in the walls. The mold included a type of "black mold" that has been the basis of legal actions and reports of illness.

Lamoureux said that General Services cleaned up the mold "above and beyond" required 1 of 2

standards.

"But one of our biggest frustrations is that those three floors are safe to occupy, yet BOE has not returned any employees to those places," he said.

The agency isn't convinced the work meets federal guidelines for mold remediation, said Gore, so it hasn't sent its employees back.

"The guidelines require that you know things like the source of the water, how it's been fixed, who fixed it, what kind of mold was found and how it was addressed," Gore said.

General Services has issued reports on the work, but no comprehensive one that lays out how repairs and remediation meet guidelines, Gore said. "We have our staff reviewing those reports to ensure compliance."

Lamoureux said General Services "firmly believes we have addressed every issue that has come up in that building."

None of the areas in the building scrubbed for mold has tested positive, he said.

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