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Annenberg Foundation Offers \$2.5 Million to Relocate School

By KRIS MAHER

The Annenberg Foundation is offering \$2.5 million to help pay for the relocation of an elementary school near a Massey Energy Co. coal operation, in an effort to support the West Virginia community devastated by the recent mining accident that killed 29 miners, state officials said.

The Marsh Fork Elementary School, located a few miles from the Upper Big Branch Mine, is 300 feet away from a Massey coal silo and coal-preparation plant, and sits in the shadow of a large impoundment that contains millions of gallons coal slurry, the byproduct of washing coal. Some school officials and members of the community have been concerned about the school's close proximity to the coal operations and slurry, and any health and environmental impact of coal dust on the children. Massey planned to build a second silo adjacent to the school.

More recently, its small cafeteria was used by federal safety and government officials, including West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin to provide updates of rescue and search efforts at the Upper Big Branch mine, which was the site of the deadly April 5 explosion. Reporters and photographers camped out at the school, while community members brought boxes of fried chicken, trays of lasagna and cases of bottled water.

"We're extremely pleased and delighted with this," said Matt Turner, a spokesman for Mr. Manchin, about the foundation's offer. Mr. Turner said the governor plans to make an announcement with Charles Annenberg Weingarten, the director of the foundation, Friday morning at the governor's office.

A person familiar with the offer said Mr. Annenberg learned about the school when he came to the area following the Upper Big Branch accident, and that he got support for the project from the foundation's board members who include family members.

The total cost of relocating the school has been estimated at roughly \$8.5 million. The West Virginia State School Building Authority has pledged \$2.6 million to help move the school. Massey has agreed to pay \$1 million. Raleigh County school officials have pledged \$1 million, and a local environmental group said it would give \$10,000.

A Massey spokeswoman didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. The Annenberg Foundation is a private foundation founded in 1989, and has given millions of dollars in grants to a wide range of groups, from the arts and public broadcasting to education.