

Crumbling Capitol

Stonemason points out structural problems while assessing the Statehouse

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By Jim McLean
The Capital-Journal

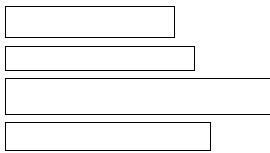
Bobby Watt couldn't hide his disgust as he tapped a hammer along a stone ledge on the southeast wall of the Statehouse.

"Do you hear that?" he asked with a lyrical Scottish accent over the hollow sound of the hammer hitting a stone. "That one there is just about ready to fall."

It isn't the only one. Pink Xs mark several stones along the wall that are in danger of popping off and falling to the ground.



Stonemason Bobby Watt used a hammer to listen to the quality of the stonework on the east wing of the Statehouse. Much of the limestone masonry on the east wing has varying degrees of disintegration due to the use of an inferior grade of limestone when it was constructed in the 1860s. Masons have cataloged each stone of the wing to determine what work needs to be done in the renovation of the Statehouse.



"This is the most dangerous area of the building," Watt, a master stonemason, declared Friday as he "sounded" stones while standing atop a massive scaffold.

Pointing to a section of stone underneath a second-floor window, he said, "All that stuff is ready to go."

The structural problems, Watt said, are being caused by water that has seeped behind portions of the wall, which was built with Junction City limestone in the late 1860s .

Maintenance work, as much as the weather, is the culprit, Watt said. Repairs done using hard cement and caulk instead of soft lime mortar have trapped water behind the stones.

"A lot of the damage you see on the stones is because some clown thought that caulking was the way to go," he said, explaining that the mortar used by the original builders allowed water to escape.

Watt is a consultant on the state's eight-year, \$135 million Statehouse restoration project. His company, RJW Stonemasons, of Ottawa, Canada, has been involved in several high-profile projects, including the recent restoration of the Washington Monument.

"He's very knowledgable," Statehouse architect Bill Groth said of Watt. "But I don't buy into all of

what he says."

Groth is concerned that the state won't be able to afford all that Watt and consultant John Feinberg believe needs to be done.

Feinberg, a specialist in conservation architecture, spent the past two weeks with Watt examining virtually every stone in the Capitol's east wing. They recorded their findings in thick notebooks, which they will use to compile a cost estimate for repairing and rehabilitating the wing's exterior.

Feinberg feels an almost mystical connection to the building, and he believes that Kansans should, too.

"That is Kansas limestone," he said while waiting to take Groth and other project officials up on the scaffolding. "It is the state's geological history, it's seabed. It is the very foundation of the state."

Audio

Bobby Watt, president of RJW Stonemasons

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Feinberg said the cost of repairing and replacing damaged and weathered stone in the east wing could run as high as \$4.8 million. But Groth is hoping the cost won't be that high when he gets Feinberg's and Watt's official estimate next week.

"We may have to pick and choose a little bit," Groth said. "There are things that we might want to look at and say, 'Can we live with those if the budget gets tight?'"

The Legislature has authorized \$40 million to get the Statehouse restoration project started. And it approved a bill last session permitting the state to sell bonds to pay for construction of a \$15 million parking garage underneath the north lawn of the Capitol.

Though the Legislature has been willing to fund the project so far, Groth and others are concerned that a slowing economy and shrinking state revenues will prompt calls from some lawmakers to scale it back. To avoid such a showdown, Groth said he is determined to scrutinize every spending request in an attempt to control costs.

Still, he acknowledged that much of the work that Feinberg and Watt are advocating can't wait.

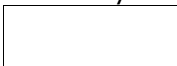
"There is a fair amount of stone work that is at a critical stage and needs to be done," Groth said. "There isn't any question that some of the (maintenance) work that we've done has been done improperly."

Groth said the east wing -- the first section of the Statehouse to be completed -- is the most needy part of the building. It was constructed out of soft limestone quarried near Junction City. The rest of the Capitol was built using a higher-quality stone from quarries near Cottonwood Falls.



The east wing of the Statehouse, which was built from limestone quarried near Junction City has shown the most

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decay. The rest of the Capitol was built with stone quaried near Council Grove.

Gov. Bill Graves made his position clear last week, saying that the state needs to marshal the resources -- tight budget times or not -- to make sure that no corners are cut on the restoration project.

"We ought to do this once and we ought to do it right," Graves said. "We need to figure out how to get the Capitol restoration done completely and without sparing expense so that it is properly done and serves us well for a couple hundred more years."

Watt, who has worked on many historic structures around the world, said the Kansas Statehouse ranks among the most beautiful he has seen. But he said it is in urgent need of attention from craftsmen who know what they are doing.

"From two blocks away, the building looks stunning and always will," Watt said. "From two feet away, it is a different story altogether."

Back up on the scaffolding, he spotted a section of stone that he feared was dangerously close to falling off. He went to work with his hammer.

"I'm just taking it off," he said. "Because if I leave it up there and it falls on somebody's head it will be on my conscience."

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