

Towering task at the Statehouse

Work to prepare the dome for a sculpture is proceeding on schedule, but future phases of the Capitol restoration project could be delayed by budget problems

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By Jim McLean
The Capital-Journal

Iron workers spent much of the last week laboring more than 300 feet off the ground to erect scaffolding around a portion of the Statehouse dome.

The structure will serve as a platform for workers installing reinforcement beams so that the dome can withstand forces exerted by the Kansas wind on a 20-foot, 4,000-pound sculpture of a Kanza Indian that is to be placed atop it in October.

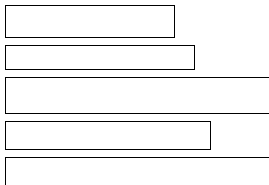
"The weight is immaterial, the dome won't even know that sculpture is up there," said Statehouse architect Barry Greis, inserting a pen between the fingers of his right hand, which he had doubled into a fist to represent the dome.



Chuck Hornbeck, a Patton Construction Systems carpenter, gives orders to a crane operator for lowering a scaffold at the top of the Statehouse. A variety of improvements and reinforcements are being made to the Capitol dome as well as the surrounding exterior.

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Tilting the pen as the wind might the sculpture, Greis said, "We've got to protect against wind shear."

The statute -- being finalized by Salina Sculptor Richard Bergen -- was paid for with private donations. But the

\$750,000 it will cost to reinforce the dome is coming from taxpayers -- specifically from state-backed bonds sold to pay for a comprehensive renovation of the Capital building.

Several attempts were made by legislators during the 2002 session to block funding for the dome work, but Gov. Bill Graves rescued the project.



Greis told a legislative committee on Friday that the statue of the Kaw warrior -- called Ad Astra after the state's motto -- will be placed atop the dome sometime between Oct. 4 and Oct. 7. It will replace a 1,000-watt light bulb that has adorned the the top of the Capitol for much of the building's history.

"It looks like a done deal," said Rep. Clay Aurand, R-Courtland, a note of resignation in his voice.

Aurand was among the lawmakers who argued that public money shouldn't

Steel I-beams hoisted through the Capitol dome's windows are used to strengthened the structure in preparation for the installation of a 20-foot tall statue of a Kansa Indian.

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be spent to facilitate the placement of the sculpture at a time when the state is struggling to balance its budget.

Restoration could be delayed

While the Ad Astra sculpture finally seems like a done deal after more than 20 years of wrangling, continuing budget problems could force a temporary halt in the \$135 million Capital restoration project -- the building's first top-to-bottom face-lift in more than 80 years.

So far, \$55 million in state-backed bonds have been sold to pay for the first-phase of the project, which includes the restoration of the east wing and the construction of an underground parking garage beneath the north grounds.

The initial bonds should provide enough to keep the project on schedule through the end of next year, Greis said. But in late 2003 or early 2004 another \$28 million will be needed.

Several lawmakers are starting to voice concerns about proceeding if the state's budget problems haven't eased by then. They say the Legislature and the new governor may have to delay the next phase of the project until the economy recovers.

"It might have to be stretched out over a little longer period of time," said Rep. Clay Aurand, R-Courtland, the speaker pro-tem of the House and a member of the committee overseeing the restoration project.

But others, including Senate Majority Leader Lana Oleen, R-Manhattan, would like to find a way to continue the work, which in addition to restoring the appearance of the Statehouse, will add offices and committee rooms and update the building's antiquated -- and in some cases dangerous -- mechanical systems.

"The more you delay, the more it costs," Oleen said. "That certainly needs to be understood by those who wish to take another look at the commitment we've made."

The project, which began in January with excavation for the parking garage is scheduled to take eight years to complete. The parking garage, which will feature 550 spaces, 200 of which will be designated for visitors -- should be finished in December 2003, just in time for the start of the 2004 legislative session.

Right after the end of the 2003 legislative session, work will begin on the restoration of the east wing, the oldest section of the Capitol.

West wing cracks concern some

In mid-July, Statehouse denizens working on the second and third floors of the west wing started noticing cracks in the plaster walls of their offices.

Greis had special, plastic devices inserted into the cracks to measure whether they were widening as work on the west wing's foundation continued.

On Friday, Greis reassured told legislative leaders that the cracks were isolated to plaster interior walls and weren't worsening. He said there was no evidence of any damage to structural or load-

bearing walls.

He said the cracks were caused when the building settled as workers dug a deep trench along the foundation of the west wing for an underground utility vault. He said the excavation work has been temporarily suspended while planners talk about re-routing some duct work.

Most of the lawmakers seemed satisfied by the explanation, but not House Minority Leader Jim Garner, who said he remained concerned about cracks in the second-floor offices of some Democratic legislators.

"I must say, the cracks there look a little more than cosmetic," he said.

Asked by Senate President Dave Kerr, R-Hutchinson, whether there was any chance that the cracks could weaken the building structurally, Greis said, "No sir, there isn't."

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