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Garage set for opener

Neighbors glad to see 200 spots along streets will be freed up

By Chris Moon

The Capital-Journal

Starting Tuesday, the Statehouse will have a lower profile in the downtown parking scene.

After more than two years of construction, the state will open its \$15 million underground parking garage on the north side of the Capitol. The garage has 551 parking spaces -- 133 of them for visitors -- and will put legislators and year-round Statehouse employees underground, freeing up roughly 200 spaces along the streets around the Statehouse during the legislative session.

That is generally perceived as a good thing by Statehouse neighbors, who must contend with busy streets and a lack of empty stalls each January through May while the Legislature is at work.

The parking garage will open quietly, without fanfare, Tuesday morning. Statehouse employees and media were given tours of the garage on Friday.



Mike Shepherd/The Capital-Journal
Architect Mike Sizemore, from left, points out the entrance to the Statehouse parking garage to legislative researcher Robert Waller as Dave Larson and Andy Kraus, both members of the computer services department, approach.

"We just consider this basically the first of many steps of the Statehouse renovation," said Jeff Russell, director of Legislative Administrative Services.

The parking garage is part of a comprehensive eight-year, \$135 million Statehouse renovation project. The building's east wing currently is being restored.

'More accessible'

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius applauded the garage's opening.

"I'm hoping it makes the Capitol much more accessible to citizens, which is good news," she said. "Certainly during the session, it's very hard for people to think about coming to hearings or participating because

there's no place to park. And I think it will free up a lot of space for commercial businesses in Topeka. So it's kind of a win-win situation."

Business leaders agreed.

"It certainly is going to relieve some of the parking pressure that we have between January and May," said Susan Mahoney, executive director of Downtown Topeka Inc., which represents downtown Topeka businesses. Opening up parking spaces along downtown streets makes business properties more

valuable, she said.

Jan Nolting Carter, associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church, which sits across the street on the west side of the Statehouse, says the most noticeable difference for the church likely will come during weekday activities, such as funerals.



Mike Shepherd/The Capital-Journal
Full-time Statehouse employees were guided through Friday's tour by parking garage planners.

Some of the metered parking spaces along S.W. Harrison now are reserved for use by Statehouse employees. Those spots should be freed up for public use with the opening of the garage.

Nolting Carter also expects parents to have an easier time picking up their children from the church's child care center, Adventures in Early Learning. When parking stalls are at a premium during the legislative session, parents have to fight for spots and sometimes park in the church fire lane while retrieving their kids.

"It is very difficult for parents to pick up their children," Nolting Carter said. "So I hope that will improve."

Division

Sen. Dave Jackson, R-Topeka, said he hasn't heard much excitement yet from downtown businesses, many of which are in his district.

"They're still carping about the cost of it. Of course, that's talk-

radio driven," he said.

Indeed, some neighbors point to other issues.

The YWCA at S.W. 12th and Van Buren oftentimes is surrounded by vehicles belonging to state employees who work nearby. Annette Beck, interim YWCA executive director, said she wasn't sure how the opening of the garage would affect the street parking around the YWCA, but she said, "I think our members would like to have the streets back."

Still, "We can talk about parking spaces all day long, but that's not what the

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problem is," Beck said. "There's no
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doubt we have an education funding problem in this state."

Spending crucial tax dollars on downtown parking isn't the answer to those problems, Beck said.

The Statehouse, which was started in 1866 but not completed until 1903, hadn't undergone an extensive renovation since 1917. The years of wear and tear showed in the form of crumbling limestone, chipped marble floors, gouged woodwork and rooms divided piecemeal among legislators, bureaucrats and reporters.

But the project, which started more than two years ago, has carried a hint of controversy in times of tight budgets.

Plans to create a \$10 million underground tunnel system to connect Capitol complex buildings were scrapped amid legislative criticism. And reinforcing the Capitol dome for the installation of the "Ad Astra" statue two years ago was so scrutinized that Gov. Bill Graves had to find private funding for nearly the entire project.

And now the state is locked in a court battle about whether it is adequately funding its school system, which already costs half of the state's \$4.5 billion budget.

A commitment

While campaigning for the governor's office two years ago in the midst of the worst state budget crisis in years, Sebelius said she had "no overt commitment to the Statehouse renovation project." And while she said she was a history buff, she said the project would have to be considered for cuts along with all other state spending.

But the project hasn't been cut, and today, the powers-that-be aren't showing any signs of letting up on the Statehouse fix-up. The project is spaced over a series of years, paid for by bonds.

"I think in the last couple of years, there hasn't been much discussion (in the Legislature)," Sebelius said. "I think the legislators felt once it started, you're kind of committed and we need to keep going to put it all back together."

Bonding the project over a series of years has worked well because, "It doesn't topple any other program or take priority over anything else," she said.

Jackson said he doesn't expect the remainder of the Statehouse renovation to create a flap among legislators. Currently, the east wing of the Statehouse, which includes the Senate chamber, is being renovated.

Jackson said that once House members see the improvements in the Senate, the project "will gain even more support" because those in the lower chamber won't want to be left out. The west wing and the House chamber are scheduled for renovation after next summer's completion of the east wing.

The entire Statehouse renovation is slated for completion in October 2010.

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GARAGE NOTES

The underground parking garage on the north side of the Statehouse is scheduled to open Tuesday, providing 551 parking spaces for Statehouse employees and visitors.

- The garage will provide 133 visitor spaces. Previously, the Statehouse had 34 visitor spaces.
- Year-round Statehouse staff, legislators and journalists will occupy about 400 parking stalls. Aside from a press corps of about 10 reporters, the garage will provide parking for 165 legislators and staff in the offices of the governor, lieutenant governor, legislative research, revisor of statutes, legislative administrative services, division of the budget, state library, capitol police, facilities management, Statehouse architect, legislative computer services and Statehouse tour guide.
- The garage can be accessed along S.W. 8th Street.
- The parking garage has two levels, with visitors occupying most of the upper level. The lower level is reserved for lawmakers and Statehouse bureaucrats and can be accessed only with key cards.
- The garage is handicap-accessible. It has elevators and stairways that lead to the Statehouse. The garage also has a sprinkler system, a myriad of cameras and several emergency telephones. Capitol Police officers will monitor a security station near the garage elevators.
- The \$15 million garage is part of an eight-year, \$135 million Statehouse renovation. The full project is scheduled to be complete on Oct. 10, 2010.
- Eventually, all visitors will funnel through a visitor's center on the north side of the Statehouse. The shell of the visitor's center is complete, but it will serve as a storage area for construction crews until the renovations finished in 2010.
- Currently, renovations are ongoing in the east wing of the Statehouse, where the Senate chamber is located. That work is expected to be completed during the summer of 2005. Renovations then will move to the west wing and the House chamber, followed by the south wing, the north wing and the center rotunda.
- The project is being paid for with bonds. The first round of bonds, at \$55 million, was approved by the Legislature in 2000. The second round was approved during the 2004 session at \$19.8 million. The last two rounds are slated for approval in 2005, at \$21.7 million, and 2007, at \$38.5 million.