

Capitol renovations reveal vision

Rotunda access blocked off until after 2012 session

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Created January 10, 2010 at 6:01pm

Updated January 10, 2010 at 11:57pm

The Capitol will spring to life today as 125 House members, 40 Senators and a slew of lobbyists and citizens hoping to influence them return to Topeka for the 2010 legislative session.

It also will be a chance to check out the latest Capitol renovations and enjoy some of the last views of the rotunda with its grand view of the dome reaching skyward about seven stories overhead as murals wrap the interior.

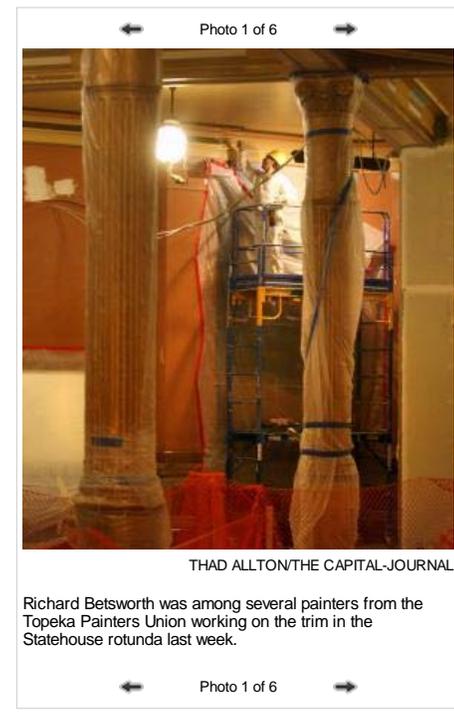
Soon — within the next few weeks — scaffolding will begin to rise as the renovation project moves into its last and largest phase. The rails on the second and third floors, which offer some of the best views of the dome, will be closed. Temporary walls will be constructed to protect some of the murals and statues of famous Kansans like Amelia Earhart.

"This is a disappointing thing, but it has to be done," said Barry Greis, the statehouse architect. "You'll be able to look through a glass window in the door and see the construction and scaffolding, but they won't have access to the rotunda until after the 2012 session."

The final phase also includes restoration of the north wing and construction of a visitor's center on the north end of the Capitol. When complete, it will wrap up the decade-long interior and exterior renovation of the Capitol that also came to include a 118,000-square-foot underground addition of office space, as well as a parking garage.

The price tag for the project is now adding up to "\$285 million plus. I just don't know what the plus is," Greis said.

Final bids are coming in. Lawmakers have committed up to \$249 million in spending, and the 2010 Legislature will be asked to sign off on any additional spending — a potentially tough sell in a year when the state is facing a budget crisis. Already the project has come in far above the \$120 million price tag first discussed, but that was before the parking garage, new office construction and unexpected repairs to the masonry and copper dome.



2010 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

State lawmakers are back to work

Monday in Topeka. Both the Senate and House will gavel in at 2 p.m. At 7 p.m., Gov. Mark Parkinson will deliver his State of the State Address. The speech will be aired live on KTWU and Kansas Public Radio.

The renovations have been a mix of restoration and investigation. Much of the building's grandeur had been obscured, from the grime on copper balusters to paint concealing intricate stenciling. The restoration has sought to uncover what visitors would have seen during the early years as each wing of the Capitol opened.

To determine what the rooms originally looked like, paint has been stripped to reveal the original stenciling and photographs have been consulted. It is difficult to know why the stenciling was covered years ago, Greis said.

"It could have been economic reasons," he said. "It could have been a different philosophy. It certainly is less maintenance if you just paint it one color, but we lost so much by doing that. We lost the vision and the interpretation that the forefathers laid out. Why would they design this? Why would by put so much time energy and effort into it? We are trying to be faithful to them and what they wanted Kansans to see."

When the rotunda does reopen, visitors will get a view that has been lost for generations. Plans call for recreating a chandelier that hung in the dome but is believed to have been taken down and donated during a World War II scrap metal drive, said Vance Kelley, a principal with Treanor Architects leading the firm's efforts on the Statehouse.

"We had heard stories about the chandelier," Kelley said. "We had trouble finding any documents about what it looked like and when it was taken down. We finally came across a glass negative of a wonderful photograph of looking up through the dome and showing us that chandelier."

Even with the rotunda closed, other spaces are opened that are worth seeing. Among them, the John Brown mural has been reopened to visitors. The chambers for the House and Senate have been restored, and the space where the Supreme Court once heard cases is open again.

On Friday, Greis walked through the Supreme Court chambers where finishing touches were being made. The room appears brighter, and stenciled designs pop from the wall and ceiling.

"The frieze on the wall and the stencils on the ceiling, that's what we found," he said. "This is all what we uncovered — not only the patterns but the colors. That's what's amazing. It's what their vision was."

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