

Wyoming spends \$259M to halt decay of aging Capitol building



A wide-angle view of the Wyoming State Capitol building. Lawmakers agreed to spend \$259 million to renovate the building and move some offices to the adjacent Herschler Building. (WyoFile/Gregory Nickerson — [click to enlarge](#))

By [Gregory Nickerson](#)

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The golden dome of the Wyoming State Capitol building is a landmark in Cheyenne, glistening for miles around when approaching the capital city. Yet hidden within the walls of the Capitol lurk rotting pipes and exposed electrical wiring. A century of fierce wind has managed to twist the dome, sending spiraling cracks through masonry from the top of the rotunda all the way down to the basement.

In numerous places the sandstone on the front façade of the building is flaking off. Last year, some of the stonework fell off onto the front steps of the Capitol. Luckily no one was injured. At present a wire net is holding the stone in place.

There's no denying the Capitol is in rough shape.

The last major renovation occurred from 1974-1980, at the height of an economic boom from coal and oil production. Before that, the most recent comprehensive overhaul was in 1917, when the building was completed in its current configuration.

Last week, however, the long drought of maintenance on the building reached an end. In one of the most significant votes of the session — and the most expensive — lawmakers approved a measure that will kick off a major renovation of the Wyoming State Capitol building and the adjacent Herschler Building. Lawmakers plan to spend \$259 million on the remodel, making it one of the state's largest building projects in the current era.

When construction concludes in the year 2017, the Capitol building will have completely renovated committee rooms and office space, plus a state-of-the-art fire suppression and smoke evacuation system. The Herschler Building will have large committee rooms with up-to-date audio-visual technology, a new physical plant, plus a new 4-story office tower with executive office suites.

Wyoming's Senate and House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved the measure that authorized spending or

the project. The bill will now go to Gov. Matt Mead's desk for his signature.

A quarter-billion dollar project

Lawmakers began setting aside money for the Capitol renovation 10 years ago. Eventually they accrued \$107 million, out of which they spent \$7 million for initial design work and planning. That leaves about \$100 million in the account, or about 40 percent of the roughly quarter-billion dollar cost of the project.

To pay for the rest of the project, lawmakers have committed to spending \$37.5 million a year for the next four years. That money will come out of the General Fund, the pot of money that provides for most of Wyoming's government services outside of K-12 education.

On a biennial basis, Wyoming is looking at spending \$75 million in 2015-2016 on the construction project. As a point of comparison, lawmakers have approved roughly \$80 million to give 2-percent salary raises for 23,000 executive branch and K-12 employees over that same period. The \$259 million total is equivalent to eight years of 2-percent salary boosts for state employees. Put another way, the Capitol renovation will cost roughly the same amount that the state spends on its seven community colleges every two years.

"Is it expensive? Yes. Is it appropriate? Yes," said Senate President Tony Ross. Together with an advisory committee, he has led the effort to remodel the Capitol and the Herschler Building in recent years.

"It is the most historic building in the state of Wyoming, and it is in dire need of repair," Ross said. "There may be people who say we should be spending [the money] elsewhere. But really we are investing in our infrastructure and in our people. ... We are looking at those investments and this is one of the most important investments we can do."



The floor of the Wyoming House of Representatives.
(WyoFile/Gregory Nickerson — [click to enlarge](#))



The Wyoming Senate Chambers. (WyoFile/Gregory Nickerson — [click to enlarge](#))

Who belongs in the Capitol?

While the bill to fund the Capitol renovations sailed through the House and Senate with only three "no" votes, it did raise questions about prioritizing the legislature and the Governor as the primary users of the building going forward.

Currently the Capitol has about 60,000 square feet of usable space. The renovation project as designed will leave the Capitol with 50,000 square feet, according to Tom Whetstone of HDR Inc., the Denver-Based architecture firm that is overseeing the project. Accommodating the needs of all the present occupants would require 89,000 square feet, which is impossible given the footprint of the existing building.

The shortage of space will force a major rearrangement of office space, with the potential to move the State Treasurer, Secretary of State, and State Auditor out of the Capitol building and into new offices in the adjacent Herschler Building. Such an action would change the historic use of the Capitol, which has served as the symbolic "front door" to Wyoming's executive officials for generations.

"For legislators, I think there is a notion that this building is only used during the legislative session," said State Treasurer Mark Gordon. "I don't think the people of Wyoming have generally been made aware of the fact that the

new Capitol runs the risk of being a clubhouse for lawyers, legislators and lobbyists, and not the rest of the executive function.”

The Wyoming Legislature meets for a total of 60 days over a 2-year period. For the remainder of the time, the main occupants are officials working with the Governor, State Treasurer, State Auditor, and the Secretary of State, along with employees of the Legislative Service Office (LSO), which is tasked with drafting legislation.

“Eleven months out of the year the Capitol shouldn’t be a mausoleum that only has the LSO, governor, and the attorney general,” said Secretary of State Max Maxfield. “Many people come here all year long: FFA kids, Scouts, Boys State and Girls State. ... They want to see the elected officials in the Capitol. This is the people’s house. It just makes sense they are able to see us in the Capitol.”



The front doors of the four elected officers who occupy the Capitol building, along with the State Attorney General. (WyoFile/Gregory Nickerson — [click to enlarge](#))

As initially drafted, the bill prioritized the use of the Capitol for the Governor, LSO staff, and security.

“Quite frankly, there is not going to be enough space,” Ross said. “Whether or not there is perhaps some sort of ceremonial offices [for elected officials] is still in the works. That is to be decided.”

During floor debate on the bill, Rep. Mike Madden (R-Buffalo) expressed concern over moving the elected officials out of the Capitol. “I get the feeling on the part of the committee there isn’t much assurance that all of these officers will be in the Capitol, and I think they should be,” Madden said.

In a conference committee meeting held last week, Rep. Tom Lubnau (R-Gillette) withdrew a House amendment to Senate File 103 that guaranteed space for elected officials in the Capitol. In its place the bill contains an amendment by Rep. Madden that deletes a list prioritizing the use of space in the Capitol for the elected officials who occupied the building as of January 2014. In effect, the amendment allows an oversight committee in consultation with the Governor to decide which officers will have space in the Capitol, but bars the State Superintendent of Public Instruction from having space in the building.

Problems with the building

The deterioration that plagues the Capitol is part of a natural process in masonry buildings, explained George Skarmas, lead design consultant on the renovation project. The spiraling cracks in the rotunda do not mean the building is in imminent danger of collapse, but steps do need to be taken to remedy the stresses.

The Capitol has multiple problems with its current mechanical systems. Skarmas showed photos of rotting pipes and electrical wire stripped of its insulation, which presents a fire risk.

Inside the Capitol, crowds of citizens and lobbyists who want to participate in the legislative process cannot cram into tiny committee rooms. “When I walked in last year, I was appalled,” Skarmas said. “Legislators almost have people in their laps when they are doing business. This is not the way to do business.”

Rep. Kermit Brown (R-Laramie) called the current size of the rooms an embarrassment during debate in the House. “People are packed in their like sardines,” Brown said. The public, the people of this state deserve better than that.”

Lobbyists also took issue with the small committee rooms. “I’ve seen committee hearings where people are trying to stick their heads in the doorway and can’t hear the discussion,” said Dan Neal of the Equality State Policy Center. “It’s not good for good policy-thinking and policy-making. The building could be improved in a way that improves public

participation and we think when that happens you get better policy.”

Lawmakers also joked about the eccentricities of the building. House Speaker Rep. Tom Lubnau (R-Gillette) told an anecdote in which maintenance staff would not let him plug a mini-refrigerator in his office for fear it would overload circuits. He also quipped about the sliding sign that is used to indicate if the unisex bathroom in the third floor House gallery is occupied. The only single-sex public bathrooms in the building are located in the basement.

The Capitol also has problems with accessibility and convenience. In order to get to the House gallery in a wheelchair, one would have to enter the building through a ramp in the basement, ride an elevator to the second floor on the Senate side, then cross over to the House side, and finally ride another elevator to the third floor.

The largest concern with the Capitol is that it is a firetrap. The building has no sprinkler system or capacity to handle smoke. “It’s a tinder box waiting to go up,” Ross said. Computerized simulations show that if a fire broke out, the building could fill with suffocating smoke in five minutes. The emergency exits would create bottlenecks, potentially creating a life-threatening situation.

“All of us have been really concerned and worried that this building has no fire suppression, outdated wires and plumbing,” said Secretary of State Maxfield. “If something were to happen to this building it would be an immeasurable loss.”

The remedies

The renovated State Capitol building will be equipped by an unobtrusive sprinkler system, along with massive fans hidden above the stained glass ceiling of the rotunda that would draw smoke out of the building. That way, any fire that broke out would be extinguished by sprinklers, and the smoke would be drawn out of the building in a matter of minutes, giving occupants precious time to evacuate, according to the lead designers of the renovation.

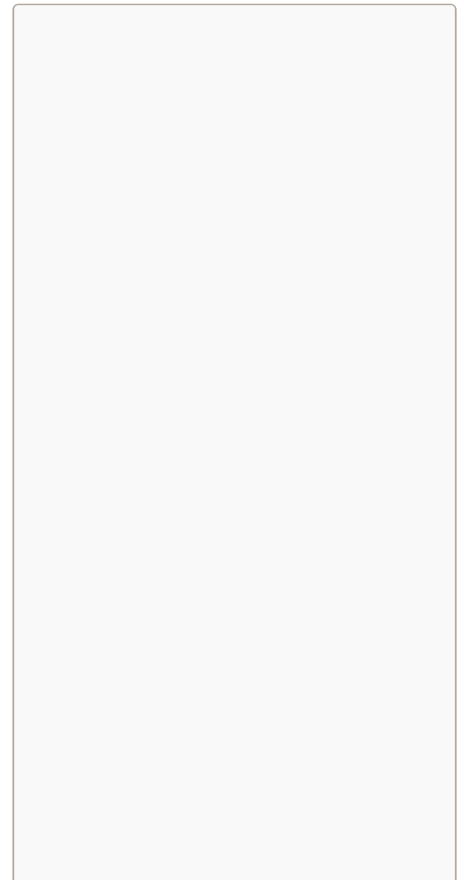
The building will have conveniences like elevators on both the House and Senate side, and restrooms on every floor. Two large rooms currently used as legislative offices on the north side of the second and third floors will be converted to large committee rooms. In their new form, these spaces would resemble Room 302, which is one of the most-used meeting areas during the session and the interim.

The plan also calls for creating several large meeting rooms of 1,000 square feet in the underground tunnel connecting the Capitol to the Herschler Building. One preliminary design sketch showed a meeting room with glass walls. The new rooms would have the capability to stream audio and video. Presently only the Joint Appropriations Committee room and the House and Senate chambers have the capability to stream audio.

Legislative leaders and architectural staff did not mention what will become of the current media rooms in the Capitol, which house reporters from statewide



A crowded committee rooming the Wyoming Capitol building.
(WyoFile/Gregory Nickerson — [click to enlarge](#))



media during the session. Reporters currently work out of two small rooms on the third floor, where up to seven people share office space while listening to simultaneous floor debate out of two speakers in the ceiling. Outside the door reporters are steps away from the third floor galleries of the House and the Senate.

“Frankly I think there should be a press and media room in the renovated Capitol building,” said Neal, of the ESPC. “That’s the fourth branch of government, and it’s important that they are close to where all these decisions are being made so they can watch things and report them to people.”

To compensate for the reduction of 10,000 square feet in the Capitol due to elevators, restrooms, and other lost office space, the project would significantly overhaul the Herschler Building. The plans call for a four-story office tower to be built on the north side of the V-shaped Herschler Building.

During construction of the Herschler Building in 1981, contractors placed footings on the north side of the building that could withstand the weight of a seven-story office tower. By constructing the four-story tower, the new Herschler Building will resemble a “W” rather than a “V”. In conjunction with the tower, the Herschler Building will also get new elevators, and a redesigned floor space that improves accessibility and traffic flow.

The renovated spaces will receive heating and cooling from an updated physical plant. The current plant, which heats the Capitol complex, is not secure. As Rep. Dan Zwonitzer (R-Cheyenne) described it, “an errant squirrel” could shut down the heating for the Capitol and the Herschler Building along with the Barrett Building, the Hathaway Building, and the State Supreme Court.

Finally, the new Herschler Building will significantly update the finishing of the current offices. The proposed design calls for new offices of statewide elected officials to have executive-level finishes equivalent or better than their current space.

“If the Herschler Building is nice enough, you may have a fight to get out of the Capitol,” said Speaker of the House Tom Lubnau (R-Gillette).

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The rotunda of the Capitol would be used as a chimney to evacuate smoke.
(WyoFile/Gregory Nickerson — [click to enlarge](#))

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The south view of the Herschler Building. A new four-story tower on the north side of the building will cost \$14 million of the \$259 million project cost. (Wikimedia Commons — [click to enlarge](#))

