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Arizona's Liberty Bell being refurbished

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The Liberty Bell vanished from the state Capitol months ago, but it wasn't stolen. It's being refurbished as part of a patriotic streak that seemed to take hold during this past Legislative session in Arizona.

Lawmakers hope the bell's restoration will become part of a larger beautification project to enhance the largely concrete Capitol Mall separating the state House and Senate buildings as a tribute to veterans.

It's also part of a broader patriotic fervor at the Capitol recently. Lawmakers have approved two more monuments across the way in the Wesley Bolin Plaza — to the Bill of Rights and the Battle of the Bulge. Legislators also spent \$69,000 to help build a Pearl Harbor Memorial in Hawaii.

The patriotism did not stop there. A newly minted law is requiring every public school, including colleges and universities, to hang American flags and display the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights in every classroom. Lawmakers are hoping for donations that would equip classrooms by Independence Day 2007.

The refurbishing of the Liberty Bell should take less than a year. For now, visitors wander past the empty spot that once captivated schoolchildren on field trips.

"Where's the bell?" students ask.

It was a mystery to most Capitol workers, including security guard Ted Robison, who had a bird's-eye view of the bell from his second-floor post in the House. Even some lawmakers were in the dark about what happened to the bell.

"It's kind of like the 'Where's Waldo' of Arizona," said Rep. John Allen, R-Scottsdale.

The disassembled bell, donated to the state in 1950, sits in a warehouse in Chandler. Three East Valley businessmen are donating their time, money and effort to revamp the replica of the real Liberty Bell.

Unlike the one in Philadelphia, Arizona's alloy bell is strong and uncracked, but the heat has taken a toll on its hardware, namely the bearings, and the wooden base and yoke.

Capitol Museum Director David Hooper had some safety concerns about the 2,080-pound bell because children can't seem to resist climbing on it.

Joe Hendel, Joe Pastore and Bill Norton of the Chandler and Gilbert areas stepped up. The men expect to spend \$5,000 to \$6,000 on the restoration.

The improvements will include removing the bars that had been placed alongside the bell to keep kids and others from ringing it. The bar had caused some wear.

The restoration included scouring lumberyards across the nation to locate a good-sized slab of slippery elm, the wood used on the Philadelphia bell. Eventually, a mill in Minnesota came through, and Pastore, a woodcrafter, fashioned a replacement yoke to exact specs.

"It gives me a lot of pride that the state entrusted us," Hendel said.

The men also want to build a structure around the bell for protection, possibly with a copper dome to match the old Capitol. A decision on whether to relocate the bell to a different part of the Capitol Mall will depend on the overall direction of the beautification project, which is being spearheaded by Rep. Jerry Weier, R-Glendale.

Bells like Arizona's were given to all 50 states and some territories. The gift from the U.S. Treasury Department and private industry was part patriotism and part gimmick. The government wanted to encourage Americans to save, and so U.S. Savings Bonds were used to help purchase the bells, which were cast in France.

"Save for your Independence," was the slogan.

The bell has become a piece of Arizona history, whether people are visiting the Capitol or hearing it ring at the Gilbert Constitution Week where it is displayed each September.

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