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Capitol improvements costly

Historic building may be temporary site for some legislative functions

Matthew Benson The Arizona Republic Dec. 16, 2007 12:00 AM

Nearly 50 years after Arizona lawmakers moved out of the state's historic Capitol, there is talk of returning at least some legislative functions to the building.

The idea is intended to ease a space crunch in the newer House and Senate buildings, where some lawmakers - especially in the House - complain they've run short of space for office staff and to meet with constituents and colleagues.

A task force convened by legislative leaders is weighing use of the historic Capitol - built in 1900 but today little more than a museum - as a way to buy time for a larger renovation or reconstruction of the House and Senate. The two box-like buildings, sitting just east of the old Capitol, were completed in 1957.

But in recent years they've become the frequent target of critics who call them too small, costly to maintain and a poor complement to the Capitol and its striking copper dome.

"My first choice would be to bulldoze 'em down and start over," said Sen. Jake Flake, a member of the task force. "We don't have an Arizona Capitol people can be proud of."

The Republican from Snowflake has been advocating for the construction of a new House and Senate since he was speaker of the House in 2004. Initially, his hope was to have the project completed by the state's centennial celebration in 2012.

"Now I think we'd be lucky to break ground in our centennial year," Flake said.

In the meantime, task-force member and former Phoenix mayor John Driggs said he'd like to see the historic Capitol back in legislative use as early as this session, which begins next month.

"One big theme of this," he said, "is returning the (historic) Capitol as the seat of government, not just an old museum."

State librarian GladysAnn Wells called the building "tangible history in a virtual world." She's also on the task force, and said she wants to ensure that its integrity is protected and it remains available to the 300 school tours and 23,000 students expected to tromp through the building this session alone.

The biggest obstacle, of course, figures to be funding.

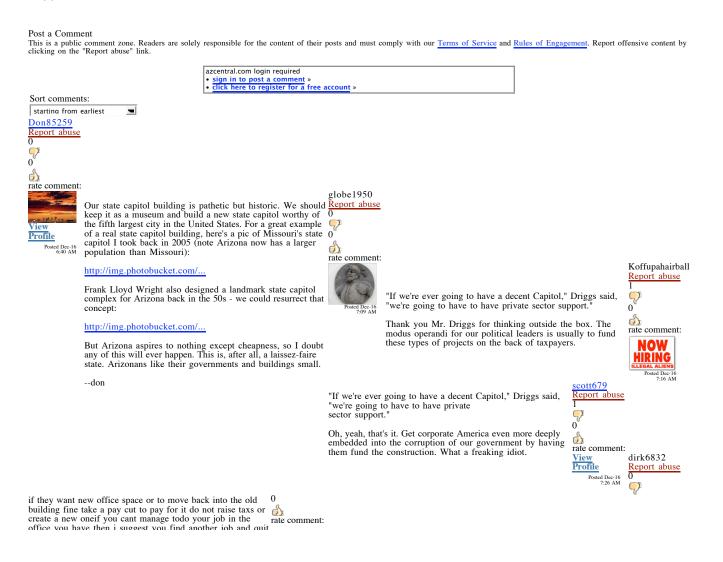
Depending on the scope of plans, making the old Capitol available for limited hearings and meeting space could cost between tens of thousands of dollars and several million, according to one estimate by an architect who has presented preliminary plans. Longer term, constructing House and Senate buildings from scratch or doing a large-scale expansion could run into the hundreds of millions.

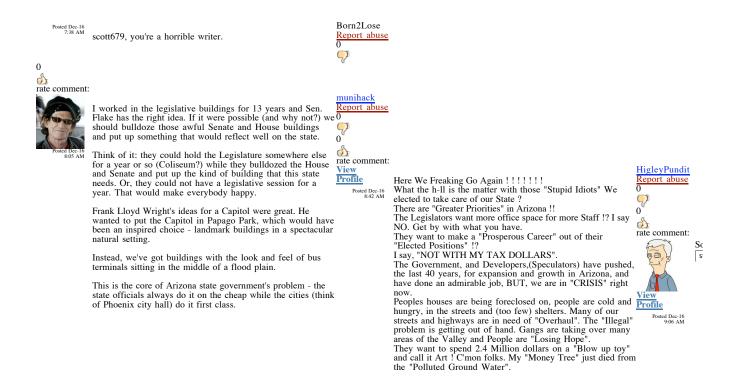
The cost becomes more problematic in light of the state's fiscal challenges, with a budget shortfall estimated at nearly \$1 billion this year alone. Gov. Janet Napolitano, whose office is among elected officials housed in the adjacent Executive Tower, built in 1974, said plans to rehabilitate the old Capitol or build anew are not on her radar screen.

"I just haven't spent a lot of time thinking about the Capitol building, I've got to tell you," said Napolitano.

Driggs conceded the funding difficulties. One solution, he said, would be to seek private funding from corporations and trade groups to chip in for an improved Capitol complex. His fund-raising goal: \$100 million.

"If we're ever going to have a decent Capitol," Driggs said, "we're going to have to have private sector support."





"...an Arizona Capitol people can be proud of ... "

By all means, let's ignore the fact that we are facing a bad year financially, and instead plan on throwing vast sums of money at "keeping up with the Joneses".