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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."

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Posted Dec-16 6:40 AM

Our state capitol building is pathetic but historic. We should keep it as a museum and build a new state capitol worthy of the fifth largest city in the United States. For a great example of a real state capitol building, here's a pic of Missouri's state capitol I took back in 2005 (note Arizona now has a larger population than Missouri):

<http://img.photobucket.com/...>

Frank Lloyd Wright also designed a landmark state capitol complex for Arizona back in the 50s - we could resurrect that concept:

<http://img.photobucket.com/...>

But Arizona aspires to nothing except cheapness, so I doubt any of this will ever happen. This is, after all, a laissez-faire state. Arizonans like their governments and buildings small.

--don

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Posted Dec-16 7:09 AM

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

Thank you Mr. Driggs for thinking outside the box. The modus operandi for our political leaders is usually to fund these types of projects on the back of taxpayers.

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Posted Dec-16 7:16 AM

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Posted Dec-16 7:26 AM

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if they want new office space or to move back into the old building fine take a pay cut to pay for it do not raise taxes or create a new one if you cant manage to do your job in the office you have then i suggest you find another job and quit

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Posted Dec-16 7:38 AM

scott679, you're a horrible writer.

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Posted Dec-16 8:05 AM

I worked in the legislative buildings for 13 years and Sen. Flake has the right idea. If it were possible (and why not?) we should bulldoze those awful Senate and House buildings and put up something that would reflect well on the state.

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Think of it: they could hold the Legislature somewhere else for a year or so (Coliseum?) while they bulldozed the House and Senate and put up the kind of building that this state needs. Or, they could not have a legislative session for a year. That would make everybody happy.


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Frank Lloyd Wright's ideas for a Capitol were great. He wanted to put the Capitol in Papago Park, which would have been an inspired choice - landmark buildings in a spectacular natural setting.

Instead, we've got buildings with the look and feel of bus terminals sitting in the middle of a flood plain.

This is the core of Arizona state government's problem - the state officials always do it on the cheap while the cities (think of Phoenix city hall) do it first class.

Posted Dec-16 8:42 AM

Here We Freaking Go Again !!!!!!!
What the h-ll is the matter with those "Stupid Idiots" We elected to take care of our State ?
There are "Greater Priorities" in Arizona !!
The Legislators want more office space for more Staff !? I say NO. Get by with what you have.
They want to make a "Prosperous Career" out of their "Elected Positions" !?
I say, "NOT WITH MY TAX DOLLARS".
The Government, and Developers,(Speculators) have pushed, the last 40 years, for expansion and growth in Arizona, and have done an admirable job, BUT, we are in "CRISIS" right now.
Peoples houses are being foreclosed on, people are cold and hungry, in the streets and (too few) shelters. Many of our streets and highways are in need of "Overhaul". The "Illegal" problem is getting out of hand. Gangs are taking over many areas of the Valley and People are "Losing Hope".
They want to spend 2.4 Million dollars on a "Blow up toy" and call it Art ! C'mon folks. My "Money Tree" just died from the "Polluted Ground Water".

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Posted Dec-16 9:06 AM

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"...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".