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## News

### Capitol improvements to the 'Temple on the Hill'

By Craig Carper, Capital News Service  
Monday, May 8, 2006 6:16 PM CDT

RICHMOND — Virginia's Capitol has been undergoing an extensive restoration effort since the close of the 2005 General Assembly session. More than a year into the project, crews are working hard to finish restorative work to Thomas Jefferson's Capitol by November in order to open its doors in time for the 2007 legislative session. Richard Sliwoski, director of the Division of Engineering and Buildings for the Department of General Services, has been personally overseeing the project, which is the first major renovation of the Capitol in 100 years.



An artist's rendering of the capitol extension.  
Courtesy of virginiacapitol.gov

"The challenge that we had here was, how do you modernize a building that's 225 years old?" Sliwoski said. "How do you put mechanical electrical equipment in and maintain the fabric of the building?"

To best preserve the structure, the crew excavated five feet down, below the floor of the Capitol. All of the building's utilities were run underneath with an access panel over the top, allowing the crew to preserve the walls as well as possible. Updating the

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electrical work was one of the more obvious issues to address during the renovation. The building's electrical infrastructure was archaic by modern standards.

"On the third floor of the Capitol — governor's policy office — you'd see window units in the windows to keep them cool," Sliwoski said.

"But the worst part was, I also had to drape the electrical wires outside to draw power from the House and the Senate because the electrical panels were overloaded. So if you wanted to plug in another laser printer, you had to take something offline to put it in. We just didn't have enough capacity to operate a modern office."

Before the restoration began, the Capitol was suffering from a hazardous water retention and mold problem. During the last major renovation, in 1906, the crews applied stucco to the outer surface of the building and then sealed the stucco with a protective coating.

"People with all good intentions wanted to do something correct,"

Sliwoski explained. "But what they did actually harmed the building.

"They put the wrong type of stucco on, and then put a coating on it. And what that coating did was, it trapped moisture inside the building"

Because the Capitol had brick foundations, the moisture had only oneway to go: It worked its way up, into the building — causing a mold problem.

"So what we've done now is we've stripped it off to allow the building to breathe," Sliwoski said. "When we first took test cuts of the stucco out just to see how much moisture was trapped back there, the building appeared as if it was weeping; that's how much water was coming out on a continuous basis."

It was the stucco in particular that led the crew to an important decision: to make all of the modifications reversible. If at any point the building's caretakers should want to undo any of the changes, they will be able to reverse them without harming the building.

Another challenge facing Sliwoski was making the building accessible to visitors who use wheelchairs or have other physical disabilities.

"The old Capitol was in no way, shape or form handicapped accessible," Sliwoski said. "With this one, everything we looked at we made sure it was handicapped accessible. How important was it to us? In order to put in handicapped accessible elevators, people had to give up office space."

While updating the building to suit the needs of its legislative occupants, the crew also took the visitor's experience into consideration. The public entrance to the Capitol had been through a back door, and that did not project the kind of power or welcome originally intended.

"When schoolchildren come to the Capitol to visit, where state business is conducted, they don't get Thomas Jefferson's vision of the 'temple to liberty on the hill,'" Sliwoski said. "What they see is the backside of Stonewall Jackson."

Sliwoski said the inspiration for the placement of the new entrance came from a painting by architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, featuring a three-quarter view of the Jeffersonian Capitol.

It is there that the new underground entrance will open its doors in January 2007. The entrance will lead to a new underground visitor center, which will include a security screening room, gift shop and an exhibit area where tours will begin.

"It will be an exhibit area which will capture the history of the Capitol as well as the legislative process," Sliwoski said. "We'll have a skylight with the state seal in a structural glass block that will allow light to come down so that we can get it into the extension."

From there, visitors will climb the existing stairs into what had been the Capitol's traditional front entrance.

To preserve the building's history, the engineers incorporated old elements of the existing structure into the newly renovated Capitol.

During the project, the crew discovered the building's original elevator cage from the early 1900s. The cage had been concealed within the building's walls after more modern elevators were brought in. The crew has now painstakingly uncovered the cage in order to restore it and incorporate it into a new open air staircase, complete with skylight.

Another design element revealed during the project has been some of the old paint in the chambers. A paint forensics expert was brought in to examine the layers underneath the existing paint. After a lot of work, a striking decorative scheme was discovered.

"We tracked the decorative scheme back to 1908, 1910," Sliwoski said. "We've gone back, and we've done extensive forensics to see what it should look like. And so now we have a mockup, and we'll be able to show you what the entire chamber will look like. To me, it's just stunning. "When people see it in its full glory, they will see that it was well worth the renovation just to bring the color and the vibrancy back to the chambers," Sliwoski said.

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