

Crumbling Minnesota Capitol Reaches ‘Tipping Point’

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ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — The foot-tall chunk of marble sitting in a state administrative office once was part of the Minnesota Capitol’s ornamental scrollwork, one small detail on architect Cass Gilbert’s century-old jewel. Now, it’s mainly a reminder of this aging building’s many deferred needs.

Time has eroded the marble’s fine detail to the point that it’s barely visible. It was plucked off the building by hand during a recent inspection of the Capitol exterior, and conservators say it’s just a small example of \$241 million in urgently needed restoration work that will only grow more expensive with time.

“They’re big projects, they’re scary projects, they’re inconvenient projects,” said David Hart, a Utah-based consultant to the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission. “But they’re projects that have to happen. It’s time.”

The spending would address a lack of fresh air circulation, outdated plumbing and tangled electrical wiring so systematic that only a major overhaul will do, the commission says. The building’s sprinkler system and emergency stair exits need updating. And the commission wants to improve public access to legislative offices and create more flexible meeting spaces.

The money won’t come easily. Gov. Mark Dayton didn’t include any funds in his proposed bonding bill. Minnesota’s budget situation is precarious, and other construction projects with more vocal supporters are vying for attention — like the Minnesota Vikings’ bid for a new stadium.

Senate Majority Leader David Senjem, R-Rochester, said the Capitol’s exterior needs repairing. Some of the other items don’t appear as necessary, he said.

“It would be nice to have a larger meeting room, but at what price?” Senjem said.

Rep. Dean Urdahl, a Grove City Republican who sits on the commission, is aware of the tough road ahead. He wants to spread the renovation over two or three bonding bills, and is hoping for bipartisan support.

“We’re going to put significant money into this project, this year,” Urdahl said. Later, he added: “It’s a question of if we don’t do something, will we ever be able to catch up?”

Many states addressed expensive Capitol restorations during the 1980s and 1990s, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Minnesota is one of a handful that has relied on piecemeal fixes.

In Colorado, a balcony once open to visitors was closed off to protect them from parts breaking off the Capitol’s cast-iron dome. Oklahoma’s statehouse saw large barricades sealing off the public from cascading chunks of limestone and mortar. Oregon put off changes to make its building less vulnerable to earthquakes, though experts believe a severe one could kill people inside.

Much of the exterior of Minnesota’s Capitol is headed in the same crumbling direction of that marble chunk, according to the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission. The structure, which features the second-largest

stone dome in the world after St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City, was erected in 1905 at the hand of architect Cass Gilbert. He also designed the United States Supreme Court building.

Today, it's one of only a few state Capitol buildings of its age that's yet to undergo a large-scale renovation. Some say the need merits the \$241 million price tag, even during a lean time. The issue is coming to a head this year after a decade of planning and a century of small-scale quick fixes.

If approved, the project is slated to start this year and could take five years to complete.

According to the commission, the building has reached a "tipping point" at which certain upgrades changes must be made in one to two years or the building will be beyond preservation and instead demand constant upkeep or complete replacement.

This would mean a loss of cultural and historic value unseen in other states, said Greg Donofrio, an assistant professor of architecture at the University of Minnesota.

"The prominence and significance of Cass Gilbert as an architect is really pretty difficult to over-emphasize," Donofrio said. "We have one of the first major works of a master architect right downtown in St. Paul."

Less comprehensive Capitol overhaul initiatives in the last decade were never fully implemented, and often didn't reach consensus due to clashes over money and priorities.

The necessary electrical, plumbing and mechanical updates reach a combined cost of about \$43.1 million, said Wayne Waslaski, a director with the Department of Administration who's working with the commission. He said they would be cheaper and last longer when done alongside interior efficiency renovations. The exterior stone restoration would cost \$17.6 million.

"When you're making those major system changes, you're going to impact every room in the building," Waslaski said. He added that historic lighting and paint work restoration in public spaces is needed, but could be done later.

But Senjem said funding the project in a \$241 million lump is "inconceivable." He said Urdahl's plan of funding over time might work, but that future legislatures can't be committed to the project.

Though the building contains health and safety risks, much of the restoration initiative will rely on public support for what many inside the Capitol refer to as "the people's house."

Rich Polk of Eagan only came to the building once years ago, but recently returned while on a visit to St. Paul — one of the 120,000 people who annually tour the statehouse.

"It'd be a shame if we as a state can't maintain our Capitol," Polk said. "They'll do something. They can't just knock this down."

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