



Construction crews lift stones on the south plaza of the Minnesota State Capitol. The \$309 million restoration project is entering a critical stage, with the House chamber scheduled to open in March. Staff photo: Bill Klotz

Capitol restoration on track for March milestone

By: Brian Johnson January 13, 2016 0

As the project settles into its fourth year, the ambitious \$309.6 million State Capitol restoration is entering a critical stage as workers scurry to get the building's House chamber open for the 2016 legislative session.

The session begins March 8. As of Wednesday, that leaves only 55 calendar days and 440 work hours — based on an eight-hour day. Take away weekends, and the schedule shrinks to 39 days and 312 hours.

Despite the limited time remaining, the project is in good shape to meet that deadline, said Wayne Waslaski, the Department of Administration's director of real estate and construction services.

Waslaski said the overall project labor force is at its peak with 335 construction workers present on any given day. Before the end of the 2015 legislative session, about 120 workers were on site.

"That is a pretty dramatic ramp-up," said Curt Yoakum, the department's spokesman.

The 110-year-old Capitol has been closed since the end of the 2015 session as trades people tackle a top-to-bottom restoration that touches everything from crumbled stone and antiquated mechanical systems to inefficient spaces.

Though the House chamber will reopen during the 2016 session, most of the building will remain a construction zone. Senators and their staffs will work in the new \$89.6 million Minnesota Senate Building next to the Capitol. The State Office Building also remains open for state business.

State Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul, expressed concern about public access to the House chamber during construction.

At one time there was talk of having the 2016 House floor sessions in the new Senate building, a move that would have been more accommodating to the public, said Hausman, who sits on the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission.

"From the perspective of the public, think how easy that would have been for them to have both chambers in the same building, in a heated, accessible space with bathrooms," Hausman said.

Waslaski said the Legislature decided in 2012 that the House chamber would be open for floor sessions during construction, and that decision was confirmed last spring by a House resolution.

Strictly from a construction perspective, it would have made life easier to keep the building entirely shut down. "But

obviously with the Capitol, you have other considerations,” he said.

Meanwhile, work is ramping up both inside and out.

JE Dunn, the project’s construction manager, pulled a \$5.4 million permit on Jan. 5 for south plaza stone removal, waterproofing and reconstruction work, according to St. Paul building records.

In the north wing, workers are focused on getting the House chamber ready.

Shortly after the 2015 regular session ended, crews started removing desks and putting up scaffolding in the chamber.

Waslaski said Wednesday that the scaffolding has since been removed. Lighting and plaster repairs are complete, new carpet is in, desks are back and voting boards are installed, he said.

Workers still need to get the audio and video up and running, install broadcast systems, and finish up some mechanical and electrical work in the House chamber. That will wrap up in the next few weeks, Waslaski said.

Other things on the to-do list in 2016 run the gamut from elevator installation, restroom upgrades, and additional mechanical and electrical work, to art restoration, roofing, and site work.

Recently completed work includes: foundations in the basement; mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems in the east wing; architectural demolition in the north wing; elevator shoring in the west wing; decorative painting at the top of the rotunda, and marble work on the west wing’s south façade.

At least 49 subcontractors have participated in the project. Minneapolis-based HGA is overseeing the design.

JE Dunn has used “strategic overtime” and some weekend work throughout the project to stay on track with “critical path” items, Waslaski said, adding that the project is tracking well on safety and participation goals for minorities and women.

By the end of the year, the overall project will be substantially complete, though some work will continue into 2017. Major construction started in 2013.

Why has it taken so long? It boils down the fact that it’s a complicated restoration project with numerous specialty trades in the mix — all within a historically significant building worthy of preservation, Waslaski said.

“It’s just a very unique building, a unique project,” he said. “The scope of this project is very complicated.”

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