

Capitol renovation could cost \$125 million

By Trevor Brown
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CHEYENNE – The proposed renovation of the State Capitol could be one of Wyoming's most expensive publicly funded construction projects in decades. Consultants told lawmakers on Monday that they

estimate the needed work will cost \$125 million.

George Skarmearas of Preservation Design Partnership said that is the amount required to make crucial upgrades to the building's outdated – and potentially dangerous – infrastructure.

This includes overhauling

its electrical, wiring, heating, cooling, fire suppression and smoke filtration systems. The project would also repair damages to the dome and exterior walls, bring the building up to various codes and make other changes to restore or maintain its historical significances.

The disclosure of the po-

tential price during Monday's joint meeting between the Legislature's Joint Appropriations Committee and Management Council was the first time the consultants have publicly discussed the price tag since they began studying the renovation earlier this year.

State officials during the past couple years have thrown out loose estimates that the project would cost anywhere from \$55 million to \$80 million.

Skarmearas said he doesn't know how the state came up with those numbers.

But he said the \$125 million amount is based on their detailed review of the building and their comparison of similar renovation projects in other state capitols.

"In our view, we have not proposed anything that is frivolous or unnecessary in this project," he said. "Therefore our estimate for \$125 million roughly, we believe, is very reliable and reflects all the needs we've heard from (state officials) and what the building told us during our discovery period."

But the price for the project could end up significantly higher than the \$125 million projection.

That is because the estimate doesn't factor in proposals to couple the renovation with an expansion of the adjacent Herschler Building or an underground connector that would add office space between the two buildings.

State officials voted in September to spend \$300,000 for the consultants to look at the cost and feasibility of those options.

What's next?

Consultants are expected to present lawmakers with more information about the cost estimates when they submit a final report that is expected in December. Lawmakers will then decide whether to include the funding for the project in the 2015-16 budget that will be voted on during the 2014 session.

Tom Whetstone, a consultant with HDR Architecture, said they will present lawmakers later this week with their findings and several "packages" to consider. But it is possible that some of these scenarios could push the cost up tens of millions of dollars more.

Whetstone said although the cost will be higher, it would be an once-in-a-generation chance to solve the Capitol's shortfall of needed office space and committee rooms.

"I'm not trying to promote a scope creep to keep expanding the Capitol," he said. "But a project like this does bring some opportunities along with it."

The \$125 million also does not include the cost to temporarily relocate lawmakers and the other Capitol lawmakers during the 27 to 30 months that the renovation is expected to take.

The consultants said they are still looking for office space for these workers.

They will additionally need to find an adequate location to accommodate the Legislature and all its functions during the two legislative sessions that would be held outside the Capitol.

Several lawmakers expressed some apprehension and even surprise at the consultants' cost estimate after their presentation.

Sen. Eli Bebout, R-Riverton, who co-chairs the Joint Appropriations Committee, said the cost is a "concern" even though it is just an estimate.

He also asked if the costs could be brought down if they only focused on the practical – rather than the aesthetic – issues.

Skarmearas responded that almost their entire \$125 million estimate is "fixed costs" that need to be completed.

He said the aesthetic components might make up 3 or 4 percent of the total construction budget.

Senate President Tony Ross, R-Cheyenne, said lawmakers will further discuss the costs and all their options next month when the consultants are expected to present their final design reports.

The Legislature could approve the construction costs as early as the upcoming 2014 session.

Under this scenario, the bulk of the construction would begin after the 2015 legislative session.

Lawmakers and the rest of the State Capitol workers would need to be relocated to temporary locations for 27 to 30 months that would overlap two legislative sessions.

The timeline calls for renovation to be completed near the end of 2017.

About \$5.5 million has already been spent on the design studies for the renovation and the related Herschler Building expansion plans.

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LOCAL BUSINESS REPRESENTATIVES STATEWIDE

Toronto council strips mayor of most powers

By David Crary and Rob Gillies
Associated Press

TORONTO – Amid cries of "Shame! Shame!" scandal-plagued Toronto Mayor Rob Ford was stripped of the last of his meaningful powers Monday after a heated City Council debate in which he argued with members of the public, charged hecklers and knocked a councilwoman down.

Ford called the move a "coup d'etat" and vowed an "outright war" in next year's mayoral election.

"What's happening here today is not a democratic process, it's a dictatorship process," the 44-year-old mayor declared.

The council lacks the power to remove Ford from office unless he is convicted of a crime. Instead, members sought the strongest recourse available after recent revelations that Ford

smoked crack cocaine and was drunk at public events.

Ford later said in a TV interview Monday night on the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. that he was "finished" with alcohol, acknowledging that his drinking had resulted in "excessive, stupid, immature behavior."

Earlier Monday, the council voted overwhelmingly in favor of slashing Ford's office budget by 60 percent and allowing his staff to move to the deputy mayor, who now takes on many of the mayor's former powers. Ford now effectively has no legislative power and no longer chairs the executive committee, although he retains his title and ability to represent Toronto at official functions.

The debate became raucous after Ford paced around the council chamber and traded barbs with members of the public. The speaker asked security to clear the gallery and a recess was called, but not before Ford barreled toward his detractors, mowing into Councilor Pam McConnell.

Another councilor asked Ford to apologize. Ford said he was rushing to the defense of his brother, Councilor Doug Ford, and accidentally knocked McConnell down.

"I picked her up," he said.

"I ran around because I thought my brother was getting into an altercation."

Visibly shaken after Ford ran her over, McConnell, a petite woman in her 60s, said she never expected the chaos that broke out.

"This is the seat of democracy. It is not a football field. I just wasn't ready. Fortunately, the mayor's staff was in front. They stopped me from hitting my head against the wall. I just need to sit down," McConnell said.

The motion to strip Ford of his powers was revised from a tougher version to ward off potential legal challenges by letting Ford keep his title and represent the city at official functions. The city's lawyer said Ford was not reduced to being "mayor in name only."

Council members said it was necessary to restrict the mayor's powers given his erratic behavior.

Toronto, a city of 2.7 million people, has been abuzz with the Ford melodrama since May, when news outlets reported that he had been caught on video smoking crack.

Ford was elected three years ago with overwhelming support from Toronto's conservative-leaning outer suburbs, where many voters felt angry about what they considered wasteful spending and elitist politics at City Hall.



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Downtown Spotlight

"Coffee, over time, brings people together," says Joy Meyer. Joy and her husband, Jay, opened Higher Grounds Cafe to create a gathering place for the city. They noticed that many coffee shops in town have a rushed atmosphere, with little seating, where you get your coffee and go. In contrast, Higher Grounds is a large space where customers can feel free to sit and have a conversation for hours at a time.

The Meyers are also dedicated to building a product that people can trust to be high quality. This ranges from the coffee beans that Jay has been roasting himself for over eight years, to Joy's freshly baked scones with natural and organic ingredients.

The downtown location was selected when Cheyenne Vineyard Church, of which Jay is a lead pastor, was drawing up plans for the 10,000 square feet in the building. There was plenty of space, so the Meyers invested in the equipment and opened the shop. Many fellow business owners have stopped in to greet them and thank them for their presence. That sense of community is exactly what they were looking for.

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