

**Statement of J. Brett Blanton
Architect of the Capitol**



**Making Congress Work Better for the American People:
A Recommendation Status Report**

**Statement before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress,
United States House of Representatives**

January 20, 2022

Chairman Kilmer, Vice-Chair Timmons and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome the opportunity to share how the Architect of Capitol (AOC) is implementing the Committee's recommendations as well as to highlight our ongoing work and initiatives.

Through resilient and unwavering efforts, AOC staff ensure that Congress and the Supreme Court can function. The Capitol campus is home to 30,000 daily occupants with more than 2,200 AOC employees serving around the clock in diverse roles to maintain and preserve the buildings and grounds.

The size and scope of the AOC's responsibility is more than the early architects could have ever imagined. Yet, we are committed to doing the difficult work that leads to transformational growth. Consistent with this Committee's focus and recommendations, this testimony summarizes many of our current efforts to maintain and improve operations and facilities across the Capitol campus.

I. Architectural Modernization

At the AOC, we are committed to a forward-looking vision of the Capitol campus that will serve Capitol Hill and the American people well into the future. To begin, I would like to update you on the AOC's strategic planning, including an initiative called Vision 2100.

Vision 2100 and a new campus Master Plan will provide an opportunity for stakeholders to provide input on plans for the Capitol campus over the next century. Vision 2100 will incorporate a broad range of innovative ideas and best practices. As a starting point, our staff recently engaged in over 40 interviews with campus stakeholders, including this Committee's staff, to gain a better understanding of future needs of Members of Congress, staff and visitors. As this process continues, we welcome further participation by Members and staff of this Committee.

Already, conversations with Members and staff highlighted the many roles the campus has for our capital city and the nation: as an office, a museum, a legislative forum, a civic stage, a neighborhood park and so much more. The conversations also highlighted many of the Committee's recommendations, making it clear there is a desire to create a more connected and engaged campus for all who work at and visit this special place. Several of the themes we heard during our interviews are consistent with the Committee's recommendations.

They include:

- Exploring how technology can better connect the campus to lawmakers, staff and constituents and support stronger collaboration as an in-person and virtual workplace
- Fostering a greater sense of well-being throughout the campus and for the people who work and visit here
- Considering new ways to preserve our nation's historic buildings while making them more accessible, safe and engaging to everyone

- Ensuring the U.S. Capitol is an enduring showcase for the innovation and ingenuity of Americans and democracy

As Vision 2100 and the Master Plan advance, the AOC will continue to engage this Committee and others across campus to ensure the vision and planning meet today's needs while planning for the future. This effort reflects our commitment to serve, preserve and inspire all who visit and work here. Collectively, these two initiatives will provide a tool kit for the AOC to align resources and prioritize decisions that preserve and enhance the Capitol campus.

II. Enterprise Asset Management

As resources permit, the AOC plans to launch a new initiative that will utilize technology in order to enhance our efficiency and operations. A new Enterprise Asset Management (EAM) system will provide a thorough asset management strategy to inform our work priorities and provide for data-driven fiscal decision-making and project prioritization. Specifically, EAM will establish a new tool to aid decision-making about operating, maintaining and renewing building and infrastructure assets such as buildings, machinery, vehicles and construction equipment. Should sufficient resources be provided for ongoing implementation, EAM will allow the AOC to proactively manage maintenance-based strategies, mitigate obsolescence, restore reliability, reduce long-term costs and forecast resource requirements.

To be good stewards of our facilities, while managing a significant backlog of deferred maintenance requests, the AOC requires a comprehensive solution to track and monitor our assets, optimize performance and reduce operating costs. EAM will also maximize return on investment, while enhancing decision-making priorities. As we exercise a disciplined, consistent approach in response to annual inspections and key infrastructure lifecycles, we will mitigate costs associated with deferred maintenance requirements. We will continue to keep Congress updated on our efforts to launch and implement this new system.

III. Space Utilization Recommendations and Accessibility

Consistent with the Committee's recommendations, the AOC is prepared to support the Committee on House Administration with evaluation of spaces and address identified needs. At the same time, the AOC is engaged in an ongoing review to determine any accessibility challenges for individuals with disabilities.

The agency is committed to improving accessibility across campus. We are actively incorporating accessibility requirements into new projects, conducting accessibility surveys and inspections of the completed projects and the existing facilities for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, providing ADA training to AOC staff, and addressing the Office of Congressional Workplace Rights (OCWR) reports on the ADA. Working with the House Sergeant at Arms, the AOC was part of efforts to address the Committee's recommendation in this area through the submission of a joint report submitted in November 2020.

In addition, we are currently undertaking two efforts that will improve our planning and result in a targeted and strategic approach to ensure compliance with the ADA. First, the agency is developing a Transportation and Mobility Study that seeks to identify the existing challenges and potential opportunities in key areas including accessibility as identified through the study's stakeholder engagement process.

For example, at the U.S. Botanic Garden, the AOC is planning to install automatic door openers on one of the monumental exterior doors into the lobby and one of the doors from the lobby to the Garden Court.

A. House Office Buildings

As Members of the Committee may know, the Cannon Renewal Project incorporates many accessibility improvements within a historic building. As part of Phase 1 of the Cannon Renewal, the ADA-accessible building entrance located on New Jersey Avenue was relocated and the door widened to accommodate wheelchairs and electric scooters. The same increased doorway width will be applied to the new ADA-accessible entrance now under construction as part of Phase 3.

For all entrances, the building lobbies have been designed to increase the amount of space for access and security needs. In addition, the reconfigured public restrooms within each wing of the Cannon Building's first through fifth floors will include an accessible restroom stall, and both the second and fourth phase of the project will include the construction of a total of six family restrooms. The drinking fountains will also comply with accessibility requirements.

Furthermore, the House Committee on Homeland Security and the House Budget Committee hearing rooms, located in the completed west wing, expanded accessibility at the dais for Members of Congress. Four additional elevators in the west and north wings now service the fifth floor, and accessibility upgrades to the remaining elevators and from the parking garage into the Cannon Building were also incorporated. As part of ongoing assessments and planning, the AOC will continue to implement similar measures across campus, as resources permit.

B. Making the Capitol Visitor Center More Accessible

The AOC worked closely with the Office of Congressional Accessibility Services (OCAS) to provide a range of services to visitors with disabilities, including:

- Accessibility of all public tours
- Audio tours
- Sign language interpretation
- Family restrooms
- Public teletype (TTY) large print, braille and HTML publications
- On-demand shuttle service for individuals who use manual wheelchairs or who need mobility assistance

In addition, the AOC is in the process of implementing technological tools for blind and low vision individuals via the Artificial Intelligence Remote Assistance (AIRA) system. This service connects people who are blind or have low vision to highly trained, remotely located agents. Currently available at all Smithsonian museums in Washington, D.C., and the National Zoo, AIRA allows visitors to download an app to their smartphone at no cost to the user. Visitors then get connected to sighted live agents who can see what is near the user. The agent then helps the visitor navigate the area. This technology will provide blind and low vision visitors a way to get descriptions of the art and architecture on display at the Capitol Visitor Center, enhancing their experience and strengthening efforts to meet accessibility goals.

C. Development of Online Programming

During the pandemic, the agency pivoted to developing robust virtual programs that have engaged and captivated audiences around the world. The U.S. Botanic Garden utilized new technology that has increased engagement on virtual platforms. The Capitol Visitor Center successfully expanded virtual tours, programs, lectures, workshops and field trips. Through these efforts, people all over the world are now able to learn about the U.S. Capitol through these interactive and educational programs.

IV. Pandemic Response

As this Committee has taken into consideration the Congressional response to the pandemic, we wanted to update you on how the AOC has continued to support the pandemic response efforts of the legislative branch. Since March 2020, AOC has implemented pandemic protocols and procurement of bulk pandemic supplies across the Capitol Complex.

As the Congress labors day and night to do its work, AOC employees are working nonstop to keep the campus clean and sanitized to enable Members of Congress and congressional staff to do their jobs safely. The AOC team continues to meet campus needs by serving as the legislative branch purchasing agent for personnel protective equipment (PPE), managing the specialized cleaning of spaces identified by our partners and assessed by the Office of Attending Physician, and ensuring the facilities and utilities are well maintained for ongoing and future congressional needs. In addition, AOC is now involved with the procurement of at-home test kits for the House, Senate, Capitol Police and AOC staff. As you know, these demands have only gone up over the past month as the entire country has experienced a tremendous surge in cases.

As resources permit, AOC will continue to meet any needs as they arise. We know our efforts are critical to the safety of Members and the staff working on the Capitol campus and are proud of the role we play in ensuring the continuity of operations.

V. Conclusion

Looking ahead, we can succeed with these initiatives if adequate resources are available. Yet, as this Committee has recognized, significant investments are necessary to modernize the Capitol campus infrastructure in a manner that adheres to the requirements associated with historic preservation.

The AOC's Fiscal Year 2023 budget will illustrate a renewed emphasis to support the operational needs of Congress, the Supreme Court as well as the entire Capitol campus. Our request will also highlight the need to reimburse project funding that was reallocated to support urgent security needs and repairs. In addition, future budget submissions will reflect agency-wide efforts to transform the agency by adopting a more predictive approach to facilities maintenance. Taken together, these important, long-term initiatives will improve our efficiency and will also contribute toward a more secure and well-functioning environment across the Capitol campus.

As I have testified previously, delayed funding for projects has consequences, and we need adequate, consistent funding for ongoing improvements. Otherwise, we may face vulnerabilities associated with the deterioration and deferred improvements of these historic buildings and treasured grounds.

We need to work together to adopt a multi-year approach for planning, design and execution of major projects. In doing so, we can continue to achieve and implement many of the recommendations by this Committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify, and I look forward to answering your questions.