

**Statement of J. Brett Blanton, P.E.  
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**Innovative Workspaces, Historic Spaces: Modernizing the House Office Buildings**

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

March 17, 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 work and initiatives.

With your ongoing support, we will continue to preserve this cherished institution and serve all of those who work here. In doing so, I share the goals of this Committee to implement innovative and necessary improvements going forward.

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, engineers and tradespeople could have ever imagined. Yet, we are committed to doing the difficult work that leads to transformational change while preserving this revered space for future generations.

Every day we work to preserve our historic and aging infrastructure for the benefit of future generations. At the same time, we are working tirelessly to upgrade our capabilities and facilities to meet the technological, space and accessibility needs of a 21st-century workforce.

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 as well as our current work. At the same time, we are implementing smart solutions for this treasured historic institution that also serves as a fast-paced and round-the-clock workplace.

## **I. Historic Buildings & Architectural Innovation**

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.

### **a. Critical Physical Security Improvements**

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.

Physical security is of paramount importance across the Capitol campus. Since my first day as Architect, physical security infrastructure improvements have been one of my top priorities. In October 2020, I consolidated all AOC security and emergency service functions under a new position called the Office of the Chief Security Officer (OCSO). In close and continuous coordination with my counterparts at the U.S. Capitol Police and the House and Senate Sergeant at Arms, we have put significant effort into addressing identified needs.

The AOC's Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 budget request demonstrates a renewed emphasis to support the security needs of Congress and others throughout the Capitol campus. Our request also highlights the need to reimburse project funding that was reallocated to support immediate security needs. In the aftermath of the physical damage resulting from events on January 6, the AOC took immediate action to fund physical security-related measures by reallocating funds from other projects and priorities.

AOC also executed several campuswide lighting, alarms and grounds maintenance projects. Additional work related to external lighting, barrier improvement and window repair is ongoing, as are several projects related to improving security around the House Chamber and Leadership offices in the U.S. Capitol.

Every day, the AOC continues to work with our partners and stakeholders to improve physical security across the Capitol campus. At the same time, the AOC worked with our Capitol Police Board partners to identify all required physical security projects for the FY 2023 budget request. While acknowledging the priorities identified by this Committee and other Members of Congress, I do need to emphasize the urgent importance of these campuswide security improvements and would appreciate your support.

#### **b. Multi-year Planning for Facilities Maintenance**

Working with House and Senate Committees of appropriations and oversight, the AOC will continue 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.

As reflected in the AOC's FY 2023 budget request, we are working to transform the agency by adopting a more predictive approach to facilities maintenance. As we exercise a disciplined, consistent approach to examine the results of annual inspections and key infrastructure lifecycles, we will mitigate our increasing deferred maintenance requirements.

Resources permitting, the AOC plans to launch a new initiative that will utilize technology 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 manage maintenance-based strategies proactively, 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. Taken together, these important, long-term initiatives contribute toward our physical security. We will continue to keep Congress updated on our efforts to launch and implement this new system.

### **c. Public Health & Safety**

As you all know, the agency began responding to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic over two years ago. Since then, the AOC team has worked tirelessly to execute a campuswide response.

As the Congress labors day and night to do its work, AOC employees are working nonstop to keep the entire campus clean, sanitized and well maintained 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. Strict adherence to pandemic safety protocols has allowed the agency to continue to meet its mission while ensuring the safety of its employees and the staff working on the Capitol campus.

At each phase, our priority will continue to be that we are meeting the demand as far as inventory and purchasing supplies made in America. In addition, we will continue to be nimble, adjusting to conditions and continuing to work closely with the Office of Attending Physician and other stakeholders across campus.

## **II. Space Utilization Recommendations and Accessibility**

As the Committee knows, I have launched Vision 2100, a power and lasting statement about the future of the the Capitol campus over the next century. This initiative will incorporate a broad range of innovative ideas and best practices. The vision is a reflection of the divers voices on campus. As a starting point, our staff recently engaged with over 100 stakeholders and conducted over 50 interviews with Committee's staff, Members of Congress, historians, visionaries and futurists to better understand the 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.

At the same time, we need to complete a campuswide Master Plan so we can take a comprehensive look at how we can preserve — and modernize — the Capitol campus during the next century. Together, Vision 2100 and an updated Master Plan can serve as a road map to implement many of the Committee's recommendations in the years ahead.

### **III. Innovation & Modernization of Historic Spaces**

#### **a. Taking Charge of Electric Vehicles**

It's worth noting one aspect of this effort has been to infuse our historic buildings with improved technological and modernized features. For example, the AOC has been tasked by Congress with the installation of electric vehicle charging stations across campus. As more Members of Congress and staff would like to utilize these options, the AOC is seeking support from Congress to implement solutions that would be more cost-effective and uniform across the Capitol campus. At the moment, the House and Senate have each taken their own approaches. The AOC would like to find a way to implement a solution that maximizes the availability and efficiency of electric charging stations as demand continues to increase. In doing so, the AOC will also be able to leverage bulk purchasing and other cost efficiencies with a more streamlined approach.

Moreover, in the recently enacted FY 2022 Omnibus bill signed by President Biden, there is a reporting requirement for the AOC to examine the use of Motorized Micromobility Devices on the U.S. Capitol Grounds. Recognizing the use of dockless commercial scooters, or e-scooters, and other motorized devices for rent across the city, there is a need to examine how such usage will come onto campus. In addition, the appropriations bill recognized that such devices serve as popular commuting options for congressional staff, tourists and other visitors. Working with our partners, the AOC will need to engage with the District's Department of Transportation and shared micromobility companies to explore the feasibility of installing shared e-scooter docking points, including hubs for parking and charging, at designated locations adjacent to campus. While public safety will need to come first, the AOC will take into consideration the request from Congress to review factors like rider convenience as well as appropriate signage and wayfinding to ensure that riders are informed of Capitol Grounds' rules and regulations for proper usage.

#### **b. Modern Families on Capitol Hill**

In addition, we have been making improvements to facilities over the past couple of years to meet the needs of a younger, more diverse and more family friendly workforce on Capitol Hill. There are currently more than 173 diaper changing stations on campus, including two changing tables on each floor of each House office building (one women's, one men's room), as well as 54 lactation stations. As with all of our services, we are constantly reviewing our facilities and making necessary updates as needed to best serve Congress.

#### **c. Expanding Universal Access**

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.

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.

Consistent with the Committee’s recommendations, the AOC is prepared to support the Committee on House Administration with the 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.

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. This study will be completed later this year and will be used to inform Vision 2100 and the Master Plan.

For example, as part of the U.S. Botanic Garden Conservatory Security Upgrade Project, the AOC is planning to install automatic door openers to improve accessibility for visitors.

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

#### **IV. Retaining a Strong & Talented Workforce**

I want to express my deep appreciation to the employees of the AOC. During my tenure, I have been continually impressed by our team members' professionalism and commitment to service, both in their day-to-day jobs and by their service throughout the pandemic and in the wake of January 6. Their actions on January 6 deserve our respect and admiration. However, the physical work of recovery is only half of the story. As Members and congressional staff know, personal recovery from the trauma of that day is ongoing. To that end, we have developed a series of programs to provide services and support to all staff. AOC staff participate in mental, physical, and financial wellness webinars. In addition, the AOC has a robust wellness program that includes a wide range of initiatives, including a Step Challenge, healthy eating demonstrations and a Wellness Champion program. Across the AOC, employees passionate about health and wellness contribute toward a series of wellness programs, including course offerings for mental, physical and financial health.

Additionally, I have enhanced the AOC Employee Assistance Program (EAP). It is a free, voluntary and confidential program that assists employees as they work through the stress of personal or professional challenges. Employees and family members also have access to TalkNow, which offers immediate, 24/7 telephonic access to confidential counseling support delivered by qualified behavioral health professionals. Going into next year, EAP will provide additional resources relating to the "anniversary effect" of tragic events, as well as specialized programs on building resiliency. Employees can also access behavioral health services that provide a number of helpful resources like monthly topical webinars, articles, tools, videos, training and screenings. While we must continue improving the physical security of the Capitol campus, we must not lose sight of the individual needs of our employees.

Through all these measures and ongoing coordination with our partners, we are working to make the Capitol campus a safe environment for employees and visitors. Yet, like all employers across America, we are also taking a look at how we may need to adjust our operations going forward. For example, the AOC is now pursuing its own review of how space is used by AOC employees. While the majority of our workforce needs to be on Capitol Hill every day, I am encouraging the use of shared desk space and shared parking as we take a look at employees who may be teleworking on a more regular basis after the last two years.

As I have said since my first day with the agency, the overall success of the AOC begins with our staff. Our ability to support our front-line operations is critical to the organization's success as well as the success of Congress. While improvement to physical security remains a top priority, I also remain committed to maintaining a positive climate where AOC employees have the skills, training, equipment and support to serve Congress and the Supreme Court on behalf of the American people.



## **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 FY 2023 budget reflects a renewed emphasis to support the operational needs of Congress, the Supreme Court and the entire Capitol campus. In addition, future budget submissions will reflect agencywide 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.

We need to work together to adopt a multi-year approach for planning, design and execution of major projects in order to avoid the risks arising from resource constraints. Looking ahead, we look forward to considering how the Committee's recommendations align with the AOC's Vision 2100 initiative. In addition, the AOC's Complex Master Plan will enable us to identify ways to address deterioration of buildings and grounds while also considering innovations for future work. As you all know well, significant investments may be necessary to ensure historic preservation, improved workspaces, physical security as well as the safety of our buildings for Congress and visitors.

Thank you for the invitation to testify, and I look forward to answering your questions.