

Statement of J. Brett Blanton
Architect of the Capitol



“The Looking Ahead Series: The Architect of the Capitol’s Strategic Plan for the 118th Congress”

Statement before the Committee on House Administration
United States House of Representatives

February 9, 2023

Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee at the start of the 118th Congress.

As you know, the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) supports the day-to-day operations of Congress, the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress. Carrying on traditions of unique craftsmanship and ingenuity, the AOC is responsible for the operations and care of more than 18.4 million square feet of facilities, 570 acres of grounds and thousands of works of art. On a typical day, there are more than 2,400 AOC employees serve the Capitol campus in diverse roles around the clock.

In totality, the House Office Buildings comprise almost 13 acres — or approximately 13 football fields — that require meticulous maintenance and care throughout the day and night to support the operations of the House of Representatives, the Committees, staff and visitors.

These numbers reflect a scale of operations far beyond what our founding fathers might have ever imagined. In the beginning, representatives worked from their desks in the House Chamber or borrowed space in committee rooms in the U.S. Capitol Building.

Since the first cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol was laid in 1793 to the tasks we face today, the Architect of the Capitol has held a critical role in the day-to-day operations of the legislative branch.

Throughout the years, our focus has remained unchanged. As reflected in our current mission statement:

To serve Congress and the Supreme Court, preserve America's Capitol and inspire memorable experiences.

Looking ahead, our team developed a new vision statement last year, reflecting our forward-looking focus:

Working together, we strengthen and showcase the foundation, facilities and functions supporting American democracy.

This new vision statement clarifies how we will achieve our mission and our ongoing commitment to achieve excellent results.

In the past year, the AOC reached critical achievements on major projects across campus, including the completion of 42 Member suites in Phase 3 of the Cannon Renewal Project (Cannon Renewal) and the successful renovation of the Rayburn House Office Building Garage.

With the completion of the Cannon Office Building in 1908, the House had the first congressional office building on Capitol Hill. There were 397 offices, one for each representative and 14 committee rooms. A modern building for its time, it boasted such facilities as a forced-air ventilation system, steam heat, telephones and electricity. Additional amenities included a post office, a telegraph office, a dining room and a cafeteria. A tunnel provided a quick underground route to the U.S. Capitol. The opening of the building resulted in the first lottery for office space among representatives.

Fast forward to today, the Cannon Renewal is on track to complete a thorough renovation of this historic building over the next few years. In doing so, the AOC addressed significant structural issues. The project also involved extensive repair of the exterior and interior stone and masonry, rehabilitation of office spaces, and comprehensive infrastructure upgrades, ranging from heating, cooling, lighting, plumbing, fire and life safety systems. At the same time, the project involved a complete overhaul of the fifth floor, resulting in restored and modernized space for Members to meet with constituents.

The Cannon Renewal also incorporates many accessibility improvements within a historic building. As part of the project, the ADA-accessible building entrance located on New Jersey Avenue — as well as the First Street entrance — can now accommodate wheelchairs and electric scooters. For all entrances, the building lobbies have been designed to increase the amount of space for access and security needs.

Upon final completion, the reconfigured public restrooms will include accessible restrooms and drinking fountains on every floor as well as the new construction of six family restrooms. The Cannon Renewal also implemented critical improvements to expand accessibility of elevators. Furthermore, the project also expanded accessibility for Members of Congress to participate in hearings and meetings for the House Committees on Homeland Security, Budget and Veterans Affairs. As part of ongoing assessments and planning, the AOC will continue to implement similar measures across the other House Office Buildings and we look forward to the Committee's based on guidance and approval as we look ahead.

As work began for the 118th Congress, the AOC provided support with the 58th Suite Selection Lottery as well as 244 office moves, including offices for the 74 newly elected representatives and their staff. During this period, the AOC also took the initiative to improve energy efficiency and safety as part of ongoing efforts to improve daily functionality and operations in all the House office buildings.

Moreover, the AOC continued to make significant progress on preservation efforts around the Capitol exterior, the renovation of Capitol Visitor Center Exhibition Hall, and other historically and culturally significant projects. It is a credit to our dedicated workforce that such achievements have been accomplished despite many unforeseen challenges and demanding circumstances.

Across the agency, our leaders are dedicated to efforts to recruit and retain the most talented and capable workforce. All of us remain committed to doing our part to foster a safe and secure work environment, not just for our employees but for everyone who passes through the Capitol campus. This commitment starts with the physical security of the campus and extends to the health and well-being of every individual on campus. We recognize the need for repairs, improvements and new projects impacting immediate security concerns, as well as health and safety issues. These efforts are essential to enable and modernize support for Congressional, Library and Supreme Court operations.

The AOC also recognizes the need to solidify existing capabilities further while increasing efficiencies and collaborative efforts. The AOC has begun a comprehensive effort to update the Master Plan for the Capitol campus, while bringing our internal agency departments into better alignment and enabling improved cross-organizational services. We also acknowledge the agency's need to execute on existing priority projects and implement our new asset management strategy. This strategy will allow the AOC to better maintain the facilities, and leverage emerging industry standards and technology to improve system reliability through modernization. In doing so, the agency will be able to operate more efficiently, reduce sustainment costs, and keep facilities fully operational and reliable to support critical operations. All these efforts reflect an unwavering commitment to provide Members of Congress, staff and visitors with a fully functioning government apparatus and day-to-day experiences as well as execute programs in the most cost-effective manner.

I. Necessary Physical Security Improvements

Physical security remains a top priority for the AOC. On a constant basis, the agency is coordinating with the U.S. Capitol Police (USCP), the House and Senate Sergeants at Arms, and other security and law enforcement officials to provide direct support on campus security.

While major progress has been achieved, we are continuing to implement recommendations from the comprehensive security assessment supported by Congress after the events of January 6, 2021. Simultaneously, the AOC and USCP continue to work closely — around the clock — to address any current needs and to be prepared for future threats and liabilities.

The AOC is also focused on increasing readiness for special events that pose unique security risks. We remain committed to working with the USCP to provide necessary resources, to monitor the proceedings, and to respond as needed to extraordinary challenges.

In addition, the AOC continues to improve its cybersecurity efforts and to further protect its networks from any intrusion by malicious threats. Given the sensitive and critical nature of the networks at the AOC, sustaining these efforts remains a priority. The AOC continues to maintain 24/7 monitoring to detect and respond to cyber incidents. Moving forward, the AOC looks to implement hardware and programming upgrades to maintain resilient, reliable and cyber-secure operations.

With the Committee's support, the AOC can fully achieve its responsibilities to support our partners as we work together to keep the campus more secure.

II. Unwavering Focus on Public Health and Safety

Beyond security, the overall safety of everyone on the Capitol campus remains a top priority. This safety can be defined in a variety of ways — safety from potential facility failures, natural disasters, emergencies and health crises, among other issues. Casting a wide net, the AOC takes a proactive role in anticipating and addressing as many of these concerns as possible.

The AOC has also launched a new initiative to have a Building Official program to oversee code and industry standards for project execution, safety and environmental projects across the organization. The AOC currently has multiple internal entities responsible for health, fire and life safety without a unified approach to code compliance. With more consistent standards and a permitting system, we can improve efficiencies and allocation of resources to address code deficiencies. To mitigate this rework and potential threats to life, health and safety, the AOC has established this necessary program to improve how we oversee safety and code compliance to maintain our iconic buildings for future generations.

Although safety and accessibility have long been priorities for the AOC, the agency continues to seek to improve itself and the facilities. The AOC continues to focus on the study and implementation of all measures that could further the safety of everyone on the Capitol campus. This includes the continued development of the Capitol Complex Master Plan, which will serve as a foundational document for master planning over the next 20 years. This plan will incorporate findings and recommendations of the AOC's ongoing studies into its security, safety and accessibility, including forthcoming study recommendations. With the Committee's support, these studies and reports will set forth a robust vision for future generations.

In this area and others, we continue to dedicate time and attention to training, safety procedure review, communications, and supervision of our workforce to ensure they are operating in the safest manner possible across the entire campus. To further ensure safety, the AOC is planning critical studies and facility upgrades. For example, the AOC is seeking fire alarm system upgrades at the U.S. Capitol and other critical areas, which will address code deficiencies, reduce the risk of system failure and improve facility safety for building occupants. Furthermore, we are planning airflow validation studies across the Capitol campus. These studies will ensure that the ventilation of offices and common spaces meet or exceed industry standards and is safe for all who frequent the campus.

III. Prioritization of Data-Driven Tools for Predictive Maintenance

The AOC's aging facilities and infrastructure present a variety of issues and concerns. The past three years have only compounded many of these concerns, as supply chain shortages, raw material cost increases and the competition for skilled workers have increased the difficulty of

addressing existing deficiencies. Despite this, the AOC has successfully collaborated with partners across campus to enhance security, safety and emergency preparedness.

The AOC's mission is to preserve operations of the agency's facilities as well as address an array of critical requirements, which range from preserving priceless artwork to replacing roofs and addressing exterior stone degradation, installing emergency generators and supporting physical security. At the same time, we recognize the limitations of the federal budget and remain focused on projects with the most immediate urgency. For this reason, we continue to prioritize projects from prior years which failed to receive funding and address critical needs.

Looking ahead, we are working on solutions that will improve predictability of maintenance needs and create efficiencies that will save taxpayer dollars. As discussed last year, the AOC is developing a new Enterprise Asset Management (EAM) system that will provide a thorough asset management strategy to inform work priorities and provide for data-driven fiscal decisions and prioritization. Specifically, EAM will serve as a new process to aid decision-making about inventory, condition, operation, maintenance and replacing or modernizing buildings and infrastructure asset components such as mechanical, electrical and plumbing equipment. With sufficient resources for ongoing implementation, EAM will allow the AOC to proactively manage industry best practices and leverage maintenance-based strategies, modernize obsolescence, improve reliability, and avoid or reduce long-term costs and better forecast resource requirements.

EAM will enhance decision-making through enterprise visibility and maximize return on investment by informing priorities. We are committed to implementing a disciplined, consistent approach to annual inspections and standardizing our approach to maintenance practices to prolong key infrastructure and enhance visibility of issues that left unchecked could truncate asset lifecycles. With this approach, the AOC can address and mitigate costs associated with deferred maintenance requirements.

Every day we work to preserve our historic facilities 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, sustainability and accessibility needs of a 21st century workforce.

IV. Space Utilization Recommendations and Accessibility

To be good stewards we need a strong plan. As we embark on the Capitol Complex Master Plan, adaptability is key. The world around us is changing fast and information in the Master Plan will provide a level of flexibility to accommodate needs.

The Master Plan will offer a more overarching approach rather than fragmented within departments in the agency. It is being updated at a time when our agency is transitioning from a decentralized management approach to an enterprise-level organization that looks holistically at facilities management and development, both for the buildings and for our grounds.

Accessibility remains a priority for the AOC and is addressed during the planning and design of new projects. Moreover, the agency continues to work toward improving the accessibility of existing areas around the Capitol campus.

V. One Team Dedicated to Innovative Solutions

Above all else, the AOC's mission cannot be fulfilled without its dedicated employees possessing the skills required to meet the AOC's deep commitment to maintaining the historic buildings of Capitol Hill. One of our top priorities is an innovative and empowered workforce. As such, the AOC relies heavily on a workforce that includes skilled tradespeople that have been in short supply in the labor market for the past several years. With that in mind, we are taking a variety of steps to shore up current and future human capital at the AOC.

This past year, we introduced AOC University — a new organization under the AOC's Office of the Chief Administrative Officer. Its mission is to foster individual and organizational learning that maximizes agency performance and supports employees in achieving their career goals with a vision to empower employees to grow and succeed. AOC University offers an online hub that provides a wide variety of courses and training opportunities for employees across the organization. These courses focus both on core competencies for employees as well as their long-term development. AOC University will also offer enhanced professional training, mentoring programs and leadership seminars. Moreover, the AOC will continue to offer a robust selection of rotational opportunities throughout the organization, allowing for cross-pollination between jurisdictions and subject areas. AOC University is essential in our efforts to train employees, inspire their careers, and foster their professional growth and development over time.

AOC University is focused on the long-term success of the AOC's employees and the organization by ensuring the right people, with the right skills, are in the right jobs at the right time. Ultimately, AOC University will improve workforce capability and transform employee learning to support excellent results.

The AOC is also focused on attracting and training future talent by expanding internships and opportunities for students in careers aligned with the AOC's needs. At the same time, the agency is increasing the use of career ladders to encourage professional development of our current workforce. For example, the AOC recently established a partnership with the American College of the Building Arts that will allow the agency to build a talent pipeline for AOC positions that are considered hard to fill. Furthermore, the AOC continues to examine its recruitment and benefit programs to remain competitive with the wider industry. Given existing talent shortages, the AOC must continue to target a variety of sources for skilled employees.

VI. Looking Ahead: The 118th Congress and Beyond

The AOC continues to make significant progress on a variety of fronts. However, we must push forward to accelerate progress as we confront new challenges. The agency's strategic vision reflects our solutions-driven approach to problems faced by the agency and broader community, including the current state of many critical projects and facilities.

If we fail to support these projects in an adequate manner, we will compound existing vulnerabilities and costs. Postponed decisions on repairs, replacements and maintenance will only lead to more unintended and hazardous consequences. Moreover, we will face the deterioration of facilities that house and protect some of our nation's most beloved treasures.

When it comes to the Capitol campus and these facilities we rely so heavily upon, we need to conduct long-term planning with the best interests of the public and Capitol community in mind. Adopting a multi-year approach for the planning, design and execution of major AOC projects is the best course to achieve long-term maintenance and preservation of our historic buildings, while pursuing goals to expand efficient and modernized facilities.

Everyone at the AOC stands ready to support this Committee's effort to meet current demands and to plan for the future. Together, we can protect and preserve this cherished institution as well as all of those who serve here. Across the agency, we are committed to working as one team, united in one mission.

Thank you for the opportunity to highlight AOC's current accomplishments and future goals. I appreciate the Committee's time and look forward to learning more about your goals and priorities as we move into the 118th Congress and beyond.