



The California state Capitol building in downtown Sacramento, on Oct. 9, 2003. (David Paul Morris/Getty Images)

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Critics of Billion-Dollar California Capitol Project Seek More Transparency

By [Jamie Joseph](#)

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California state lawmakers are preparing to demolish and **reconstruct** part of the state's historic Capitol grounds to add more office space, at a cost of somewhere between \$775 million to \$1.2 billion, according to critics.

Since the Capitol Annex Project was approved without the Historic State Capitol Commission or comments from the public and surrounding native

communities, stakeholders and small business owners are calling for transparency from the state legislature about the source of funding and how exactly it will be spent.

“Mr. Cooley has introduced a budget change proposal to add another \$94 million to that, which is a heck of a cost overrun for a project that isn’t even starting its official design,” Dick Cowan, former historic preservation officer of the Historic State Capitol Commission, told The Epoch Times, referring to Assemblymember Ken Cooley (D-Berkeley), chairman of the Joint Rules Committee, which is overseeing the project.

“That building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and we think that means certain studies have to be done before you can think about tearing it down and those studies have not been done, either.”

Cooley didn’t immediately respond to a request by The Epoch Times for comment about Cowan’s remark.

The committee revealed new models of the design earlier this year that include rebuilding the East Annex, demolishing Capitol Park to build a parking garage for legislators, and replacing the West Steps to create a visitor center.

“The West Plaza of the Capitol would be totally disrupted, and that’s where our parades and our California bicycle race and the women’s march for cancer awareness ends,” Cowan said.

Others have voiced concerns because Native American graves could potentially be dug up under the annex project.

“It’s not ‘potential.’ We were here,” Jerome Encinas of the United Auburn Indian Community told a local news outlet.

The Historic State Capitol Commission, which was developed in 1984 to review maintenance and restoration, was denied information relating to the Capitol Annex Project, according to advocacy group [Save Our Capitol](#).

According to Save Our Capitol's website, "California is under siege—by a pandemic and catastrophic wildfires—and facing another \$54 billion budget deficit. Now is not the time to burden taxpayers with a \$1 billion debt for the next 30 years. It's time to restore, increase public safety, and preserve the historic East Annex, not demolish and replace it."

Another advocacy group, Save the Capitol, Save the Trees, filed a lawsuit in Sacramento County Superior Court to halt the legislature's plans for the Capitol.

"Pursuant to the MOU, the Capitol Annex and much of the Capitol Park arboretum and Native American tribal resources would be demolished and destroyed for an incompatible glass-sheathed structure," the [suit](#) states.

In addition, the suit argues the environmental impact report doesn't address the demolition of trees planted on the Capitol building's east wing.

An underground parking garage is also being planned in Capitol Park, Cowan said.

"We've got trees from South America, Japan, Indonesia, Europe, Southwest Asia—just a fabulous collection of trees—and this project would really damage that historic tree collection, and for an underground parking garage," he said.

Lawmakers passed SB 836 in 2016, which provides funding to address deficiencies at the State Capitol Annex, which is home to both the legislative branch of the California government as well as the governor's and lieutenant governor's offices. Ideally, opponents are seeking a pause in the current planning.

According to the state [website](#), some of the issues that need to be addressed include Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility, the removal of hazardous materials such as mold and lead, lack of public spaces, and an upgraded system to meet modern safety standards.

“California’s new Capitol Annex should convey to visitors California’s positive, hope-filled outlook, founded upon the deliberative Democracy which unfolds there, by welcoming all Californians, engaging all Californians, safeguarding the future of all Californians, and demonstrating healthful, accessible, and sustainable designs, while preserving the beauty and vistas of California’s legacy Capitol Park and inviting all its guests to explore and take pride in one of the most energy-efficient capitol buildings in the nation,” Cooley said in a planning study dated Dec. 2017.

“We owe it to the people to build a better Capitol, [but] this was done in such a process over the years where there was no public hearings, or very few abilities for the public to opine, as well as just the cost that was so through the roof,” John Kabateck, the state director of the National Federation of Independent Business, told The Epoch Times.

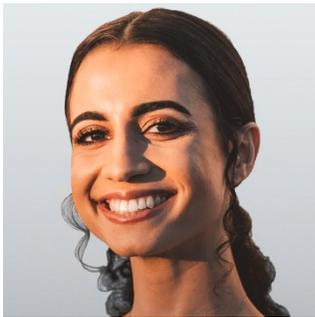
Kabateck said Cooley is “trying to move so quickly, but there was never a chance to talk about cost.”

As small business owners and employees begin to recover from the economic impact of COVID-19 restrictions, Kabateck suggested funds should be more carefully allocated.

“And then all of a sudden, we had this little thing called COVID hit us, and everybody was asked to shut down, and the building was shut down,” he said. “Who knows what the future is of the buildings?”

In 1973, the Capitol and the surrounding grounds were listed on the National Register of Historic Places and designated a California Historical Landmark in 1974.

“We should do this, but there’s a cheaper ... more cost-effective way to do this, and a more responsible way,” Kabateck added. “And we should involve the people of California before we pull the trigger on something that is upward of more than a billion dollars.”



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