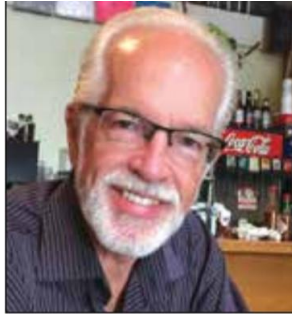


Capitol Waste Indeed

Commentary by Bruce Lee

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Just months ago, we anticipated a \$54 billion state budget deficit, expecting cuts to funding and resources that would continue the economic onslaught of the pandemic. However in 2021, we found ourselves with a \$15 billion one time budget surplus, and a proposed 2021-22 budget of \$221 billion. Finally a \$262.6 billion was approved, which includes \$1 billion dedicated to the wildfire and forest resilience action plan; \$1.5 billion in relief for small businesses; and \$2.7 billion to achieve the state's zero emission vehicle goals.

These are big needs and big numbers! Shouldn't we expect that our electeds spend these dollars wisely and serve us with our interests in mind? At the same time we are spending \$1 billion on our wildfires, our legislators are also spending a little more than \$1 billion on a luxury project for themselves.

It should not be too much to ask that a luxury project which sidelines the needs of Californians should itself be sidelined. This project – known as the Capitol Annex Project – will demolish-and-rebuild the historic Capitol Annex (which houses lawmakers' offices), build an underground parking structure exclusively for high-ranking elected officials, and construct a visitor center, to the tune of a whopping \$1.2 billion dollars. To put this sum in perspective, consider similar spending plans outlined in the state's 2021-22 budget as mentioned above. There is no doubt \$1.2 billion can go far in helping Californians – so why waste it on a project that would only benefit our politicians?

Certainly, ensuring the safety of our legislators' workplace is important. Yet, experts say that the Capitol Annex can be retrofitted to address health and safety concerns for a fraction of the cost of the current plan. Additionally, a "Swing Space" that is housing legislators during the Annex rebuild is already funded at \$450 million, with office space and parking aplenty. As for the visitor center, moving forward with a Disneyland-like attraction during a pandemic is ill-conceived.

Most concerning of all is where the \$1.2 billion project funding will be pulled from – the wallets of taxpayers. Since the project was approved to be funded using revenue bonds in a fiscal emergency, that means we are racking up 30% more in interest on the debt to be repaid over 30 years, ballooning the cost of the project.

To make matters worse, the Capitol Annex scheme was concocted with little to no input from interested parties or the public. The legislature denied project information to the Historic State Capitol Commission – which was created by the legislature in 1976 to protect the State Capitol's historical and architectural restoration integrity – resulting in the resignation of two commissioners in protest. Assemblyman Ken Cooley and the Joint Rules Committee are calling the shots. Why all the secrecy? Even without the COVID crisis, the Capitol Annex project is a stunning waste of taxpayer dollars – especially when the state has so many pressing matters that need to be addressed. While we can be hopeful about having a budget surplus, we need to face the realities of today. Many Californians are still struggling to put food on the table, many remain unemployed, and many continue to face homelessness.

When the Legislature resumes session, they have a responsibility to focus on our economic recovery, ensuring Californians needs are met first. Under the umbrella of Save Our Capitol!, the Sacramento Taxpayers Association, small businesses, preservationists and environmentalists call upon Governor Newsom and the legislature to pause the Capitol Annex Project, and reevaluate its need with input from experts and the public. If you'd like to join us, visit www.SaveOurCapitol.org today – our elected officials must be held accountable.

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