

Environmentalists sue to block demolition of the California Capitol annex

[BY HANNAH WILEY](#)

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An environmental group said Friday it is suing several state agencies to block the demolition of the California Capitol annex, a warren of executive and legislative offices on the east wing of the statehouse that is scheduled to be overhauled in the next four years.

The Save the Capitol, Save the Trees coalition argues in its lawsuit that the California Department of General Services, the California Department of Finance and the Legislature's Joint Committee on Rules must reconcile environmental review discrepancies in their plans to update the decades-old annex before demolition begins.

The Legislature in 2018 agreed to spend \$1.2 billion to [renovate the east side of the Capitol](#) and build a new downtown office space for lawmakers to temporarily use during construction. The plan was part of a larger effort by former Gov. Jerry Brown to modernize state government buildings.

The group argues that since the Department of General Services released an original environmental review plan in 2019, changes to the project's outline now include "previously-unforeseen environmental impacts." The coalition is fighting for a new analysis.

The complaint also alleges that the state agencies didn't consider alternatives to bulldozing, and instead "generated bureaucratic and financial momentum" in favor of destruction, in violation of environmental review standards. They said current plans, which include a modern, glass building with an underground parking garage and visitor's center, would destroy a historically significant building and a variety of important trees that outline the annex.

"How tragic that after the Joint Rules Committee failed for decades to maintain and upgrade our world-recognized Capitol Annex, Californians are now asked to accept needless demolition to make it safe and useful again," Richard Cowan, former chair of the Historic State Capitol Commission who has previously worked on Capitol restoration efforts, said in a statement. "We cannot allow it to happen when alternatives are feasible."

A copy of the lawsuit shows it was filed in Sacramento Superior Court, but online court records haven't yet been updated to verify that information.

Proponents of the project have long argued that the current annex is an [outdated and dangerous structure](#) for legislators and staff to conduct the people's business. According to the project's website, the building is littered with hazardous material like asbestos and mold, and the hallways are so outdated that they violate American Disabilities Act rules.

"Maintenance of the current building's antiquated and failing systems are costly, difficult to repair, and fail to provide the public with a safe and accessible venue to engage with their government," Assemblyman Ken Cooley, a Rancho Cordova Democrat who has spearheaded the project's plans, said in a previous statement. "The annex project has emerged from consideration of these perils by three administrations and, as it puts dollars into the regional economy, it will specifically address these vital health, life safety, accessibility and security deficiencies."

Cooley and the Department of General Services did not respond to Friday requests for a comment on the lawsuit.

Lawmakers are still finalizing the new building’s blueprint. But a March presentation during a Joint Rules Committee hearing addresses [”park and tree preservation.”](#) Some trees within the footprint of the construction, the presentation includes, would be protected, while others would be relocated. A “Frequently Asked Questions” document provided by the Legislature states the Joint Rules Committee is [“actively working with arborists and landscaping experts](#) to preserve as many trees as possible within and nearby the Annex Project footprint.”

The document also claims that the building cannot just be renovated because that would not fix fundamental structural flaws, and that lawmakers can’t stay in the swing space because that would increase “barriers for access by the public to lawmaking.”

Legislators are scheduled to move into the so-called “swing space” at the end of this year and use those corridors until the annex is scheduled to be completed in 2025.



The Capitol annex, which houses lawmakers’ offices, is a decades-old building attached to the east side of the Capitol. *RANDALL BENTON SACRAMENTO BEE FILE*