

OPINION



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Big changes coming to Oregon State Capitol

If you were building a state capitol, would you construct it on stilts? Probably not. But such an idea would borrow from the mind of Salem native A.C. Gilbert, who invented the Erector Set in the early 20th century.

More than a century later, the Oregon State Capitol is not actually being erected on stilts. Still, that is a handy image for visualizing the steel shoring that will hold up the massive 1938 portion of the building while base isolators and new columns are installed underneath.



DICK HUGHES

A base isolator is key to reducing damage in an earthquake.

“Think of it as the building sort of sitting

on a springy cushion. What it allows it to do is the building stays put while the ground moves under it,” said Jodie Jones, the Capitol Accessibility, Maintenance and Safety project director.

Major seismic upgrades are part of phase 3, now underway. Phase 2 has included seismic work in the legislative office wings, hearing rooms and underground parking garage.

Compared with what I’ve heard from politicians, Jones offered a realistic answer when I asked how a seismically reinforced Capitol might fare in a 9.0 Cascadia quake.

“You can’t really just pick a number and say this is seismically safe up to such-and-such a level. The reason for that is, it all depends on where the original earthquake happens. What the epicenter of it is and how close it is to where you are. How many aftershocks,” she said.

“People always want to say, ‘Are you safe to a Level 9?’ Well, I can’t say that because a Level 9 under the building is different than a Level 9 that’s 50,



Hoffman Construction Co.

A multiphase improvement project is underway at the Oregon State Capitol.

100, 300 miles away.”

When a quake happens, the seismic upgrades have two aims: 1) Enable the occupants to safely exit the building, and 2) Get the Capitol back up and running as quickly as possible so the work of government can continue, which is doubly important during a disaster.

All this is part of making the “People’s House” safe for the people.

How to get in: The Capitol’s main entrances are closed due to the construction, but signs direct people to one door each on the east and west sides.

Parking around the Capitol is problematic due to the construction and other reserved spaces. Meanwhile, construction continues across the street at the Justice and Supreme Court buildings, although that work should wrap up this year.

Jones said she appreciates the patience shown by the public, legisla-

tors and employees in dealing with the noise, dust and inconvenience. Phase 3 requires the 1938 portion of the Capitol — including the rotunda and governor, secretary of state and treasurer offices — to be vacated for 2 1/2 years.

Still, she said, “We’re trying to get this done as quickly as possible.”

And within budget and on time.

Other improvements: The half-billion-dollar project includes:

- Bringing the electrical, plumbing and HVAC systems up to code, including improved air circulation that meets the latest standards.

- Improved lighting. LED is being installed wherever possible, including the Senate and House chambers.

- Two new staircases to the lower level, which will be called the concourse instead of the basement, and additional staircases on the north side.

- Four additional hearing rooms,

which will be on the concourse level.

- A new, larger café for the public.
- A new private lounge for all legislators, replacing separate eating areas for the Senate and House.

- Accessibility improvements throughout, including building entrances and ramps on the dais area of the Senate and House chambers.

- Two new courtyards on the first floor, replacing ones in the basement. The basement is being gutted, so everything there is being redone or moving, including the press room.

- Fire-suppression systems and improved fire-detection throughout the Capitol.

- Resealing and repairs throughout, including exterior cleaning.

- Installation of an emergency generator with expanded capacity.

Legislative schedule: Committees will meet virtually for Legislative Days, Sept. 21 to Sept. 23. The Senate will have an in-person floor session Sept. 23.

The Senate and House wings are open to the public, including all member offices. (Being a legislator theoretically is a part-time job, so don’t count on finding your lawmaker in the office during the interim.)

The format for the December Legislative Days has not been announced.

Although virtual testimony options will remain available, in-person committee meetings are planned for the 2023 Legislature. Hearing Rooms A-F, 170 and 174 will be available for committees, but not rooms in the old part of the Capitol until construction finishes in late 2025.

The House and Senate chambers will be open during legislative sessions. Jones said public access will be limited for fire safety due to construction.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

GUEST COLUMN

Coming together to secure our water future

Oregon agriculture continues to persevere amid historic drought conditions, worldwide supply chain issues, burdensome and unnecessary regulation and global food insecurity at a level not seen in recent memory.

As an industry we can do a lot, but it’s time to recognize that things must change. As droughts increase in severity and intensity, we must position ourselves to be resilient and adaptable when it comes to changing conditions.

Our members are consistently looking for innovative new ways to get the work done in an efficient and sustainable manner while continuing their significant role in feeding and clothing the world and making substantial contributions to the statewide, national and global economy.

If we are going to continue to be part of the solution, it is essential that we are able to access our most basic need: water.

Recently, our organizations partnered together to form the Oregon Agricultural Water Alliance, which will focus on strategic water investments and common-sense policies to promote sound water management and agricultural sustainability throughout our beautiful state. The need for this work has never been greater.

Collectively, our organizations represent a broad spectrum of individuals and entities that serve nearly 600,000 irrigated acres and represent over 14,000 producers of food and other agricultural products in Oregon.

The future of irrigated agriculture and the survival of family-owned and operated farms and ranches in Oregon is at risk like never before. As organizations with diverse memberships throughout the state, we can no longer afford to work separately if we hope to bring much-needed change to the state’s water management. We recognize that together, we are stronger, and this is how we will operate as we look ahead to a critical legislative session and key election cycle in the months to come.

Our state cannot risk continuing down the path of disinvestment in water storage. State and federal agencies must be accountable for effective and efficient water management. Oregon needs outcome focused partnerships, not regulatory roadblocks that penalize creative problem-solving. As opportunities arise, we need to be prepared to leverage federal funding for state and local infrastructure projects.

Moreover, the state must facilitate opportunities as part of its own water resources strategy. Unfortunately, we are already behind on this front.

As an alliance, we will work to shift



Nathan Howard/AP Photo

Phil Fine checked for carrot seeds in the soil left behind by a combine while harvesting a field in the North Unit Irrigation District near Madras last year.

LETTERS WELCOME

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state water policy to prioritize maintaining an adequate, safe and affordable food supply, creating more water storage both above and below ground, creating drought resilient programs and projects, increasing interstate cooperation in water supply and management, demanding more agency accountability and reducing costly and unnecessary state agency litigation.

Together, we plan to create positive

change by developing viable pathways for water projects implementation, advocating for needed changes to agency processes and administration, conducting tours for legislators and agency staff to highlight opportunities to improve or create water projects and proactively supporting innovation.

We believe it is critical that the public be informed about the importance

of irrigated agriculture for the state’s future health and prosperity. A recent poll asked Oregonians about the importance of the agriculture and livestock sectors to Oregon’s economy; a whopping 70% of Oregonians, across a wide range of ages, political parties and geographic areas, responded that the industries are “extremely important.”

Without the proper investment in water storage, and a shift in water policy and management, it will be a matter of time before we lose significant portions of our distinctive and diverse agriculture industry — a critical piece of what makes our state the exceptional and unique place that it is.

Signatories to this guest column are Todd Nash, president of Oregon Cattlemen’s Association; Mike Miranda, president of Oregon Dairy Farmers Association; Angi Bailey, president of Oregon Farm Bureau; Josh Robinson, president of Oregon Association of Nurseries; Jake Madison, president of Northeast Oregon Water Association; Rex Barber, president of Water for Life Inc.; and Brian Hampson, president of Oregon Water Resources Congress.