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The Capitol Annex project is turning into Sacramento's never-ending nightmare | Opinion

By Samantha Corbin, [Special to the Sacramento Bee](#)

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California's State Capitol remodeling project [has drifted into uncertainty, without direction](#), accountability, or a clear path forward. This development is a troubling sight for anyone who values fiscal responsibility, historical preservation and the prudent stewardship of taxpayer dollars — not to mention the disruption to Downtown Sacramento caused by the project.

Originally intended to be a renovation that preserved the existing architectural footprint, the scope of the Capitol remodel has swelled in size and price tag, now [estimated at almost \\$1.2 billion](#). This expanded proposal was rushed through the Legislature without the proper transparency or process, spawning lawsuits that delayed demolition and prompting courts to require the state to reevaluate its plans.

The demolition of the annex is complete. Astonishingly, however, there is still no approved plan for what comes next. The project seems suspended in a state of confusion, lacking coherent vision, concrete timelines or clear leadership. Those who initially championed the project — Senator Robert Hertzberg and Assemblymember Ken Cooley — have exited the Legislature, leaving the remodeling project without leadership and embroiled in controversy.

According to an [Aug. 10 story in The Bee](#), getting any information on the progress of the Capitol remodel is challenging.

“The Bee reached out to multiple sources related to the project to inquire about the project timeline and progress but did not receive an answer....A press secretary for Senator John Laird, who is the Vice Chair of the Joint Rules Committee, said that the senator has no comments at this time, as the project is still in EIR review period.”

A symbol of our history, the West Steps of the Capitol are now threatened with an excavation and rebuild timeline that severely limits public gathering space. I had the honor to speak there at the Women's March in 2017, just as thousands of Californians have over the years. Without a concrete plan, how can we justify such a radical alteration of this significant landmark?

Demolition of something so integral to our heritage should be grounded in a well-thought-out and approved plan, not vague promises.

With hundreds of millions of dollars at stake — coupled with a substantial state budgetary deficit — the lack of a responsible guiding force and a coherent plan is concerning and irresponsible. Neither the Joint Rules Committee nor the Department of General Services will take ownership, and the timeline continues to change due to delays and lawsuits.

Prior to losing re-election, Cooley said the entire project would be complete in 2025. That seems highly unlikely. Worse, the legislature's own Environmental Impact Report noted that the project would take several years, and would have a profound, negative impact on parking and infrastructure downtown, causing harm to numerous local businesses that have only begun to recover from the pandemic. Yet our local leaders have remained silent on the project.

Recently, local and state media have expressed frustration about the project as well, as the construction has been used to justify limiting access to certain areas of the Capitol and their ability to approach elected officials and ask questions. It's unclear how long both public and media access will be curtailed, or if they will be restored at all following years of anticipated construction limbo.

This frustrating situation does offer an opportunity: Given significant challenges to our state budget, including funding pressures for essential programs like housing, healthcare, education and climate change mitigation, now is the time to reassess the entire project. By modernizing the Annex with a secure design that's compatible with the Capitol and halting the components of the project that would demolish the West Steps and rip up Capitol Park for an unnecessary parking garage, we can save hundreds of millions of dollars.

Gov. Gavin Newsom and the entire Legislature must confront difficult questions: Why is such a significant project allowed to drift aimlessly? Why is no one stepping forward to guide this endeavor? Where are the voices of reason to bring clarity, purpose and fiscal prudence?

There is still time to set a new course. There must be a comprehensive public review of the entire project. Transparent discussions about goals, costs, timelines and impacts are essential. Engaging experts, stakeholders and the public in conversation is vital.

We must recommit to preserving and restoring the Capitol, modernizing it for safety and doing so with respect for our history and budget. In our current fiscal climate, this project presents an opportunity to showcase responsible governance.

We must be faithful stewards of our resources and heritage.

Samantha Corbin is the CEO of the firm Corbin & Kaiser.