



May 29, 2026

The Honorable Bryan Steil
Chairman
Committee on House Administration
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Joseph D. Morelle
Ranking Member
Committee on House Administration
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and Members of the Committee:

We write to commend the Committee on House Administration for holding its upcoming oversight hearing with Architect of the Capitol Thomas Austin. This is an important opportunity for the Committee and the Architect to publicly discuss the long-term future of the Capitol campus, the condition of the buildings that support Congress's work, and the steps necessary to ensure that Congress remains both open for work and open to the public.

Architect Austin has begun to provide important top-line information about the challenges facing the Capitol complex. He has testified recently regarding the critical need to renovate the Rayburn House Office Building and has indicated that many buildings across the Capitol campus will require significant attention over the next two decades. We understand that the Architect of the Capitol is developing a campus master plan, with the goal of completing that work by this fall. We appreciate Architect Austin's candor about the broad scale of these challenges and his work to develop a more comprehensive plan for addressing them, and we look forward to a discussion that will delve into many of the underlying details.

As the Committee conducts its oversight, we encourage it to emphasize the importance of clear, sustained communication with all congressional stakeholders about the challenges facing the Capitol campus and the choices ahead. Those stakeholders include not only Members of Congress and congressional staff, but also journalists who work on Capitol Hill, advocates, civic organizations, visitors, researchers, nearby residents, and the general public. The Capitol complex is not merely a set of office buildings. It is the working home of the legislative branch, a public forum, and a living symbol of representative democracy.

Other legislatures around the world have faced similar challenges and have made significant efforts to explain those challenges to the public. In the United Kingdom, the Restoration and Renewal Programme maintains a public website that explains the need to restore the Palace of Westminster, provides updates on the programme, and describes the work necessary to preserve the Palace as the home of both Houses of Parliament for future generations.¹ In Canada, the Centre Block project website provides videos and photos, quarterly progress reports, information on project status, construction, cost, and milestones, and other materials explaining the restoration and modernization of the home of Canada's Parliament.²

These public-facing resources are useful models. They recognize that parliamentary buildings are not only historic landmarks or shrines to democracy; they are places where democracy is practiced. Public understanding is essential to sustaining confidence in major renovation and modernization efforts, especially when those efforts are complex, expensive, disruptive, and necessary.

We also urge the Committee and the Architect of the Capitol to ensure that the campus master planning process includes meaningful engagement with a broad range of stakeholders. Representatives of journalists, advocates, visitors, members of the public, nearby residents, and affected communities can provide valuable insights that improve the final plan. This is especially important because one of the major drivers of cost in large reconstruction and renovation projects is the need to make changes after a plan has already been locked in. Early engagement can help identify needs, reduce avoidable redesign, and ensure that the plan reflects how the Capitol campus is actually used.

For example, representatives of people with disabilities can help ensure that accessibility is built into the plan from the outset rather than treated as a later compliance requirement. Journalists can help identify the facilities and access needed to support public reporting on Congress. Advocates and civic organizations can speak to the needs of the public when attending hearings, meetings, and events. Nearby residents can provide perspectives on construction impacts, public access, and neighborhood concerns. These perspectives will strengthen the master plan and improve public confidence in the process.

The Committee may also wish to consider how the physical design of congressional spaces shapes the work of Congress itself. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress demonstrated the value of thinking institutionally about how Congress functions. Past changes to the Capitol campus affected congressional operations in profound ways. The creation of hearing rooms with witness tables and committee dais configurations facing the public, rather than spaces designed primarily for Members to face one another, changed the character of congressional proceedings. Design choices can encourage openness, deliberation, and collaboration.

¹ <https://www.restorationandrenewal.uk/>

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<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-services-procurement/services/infrastructure-buildings/parliamentary-precinct/projects-in-parliamentary-precinct/centre-block-project.html>

The next generation of Capitol campus planning should similarly consider how space can support a more effective Congress. Collaboration spaces for staff, modern meeting rooms, accessible public event spaces available for congressional reservation, improved hearing rooms, and facilities that better support journalists and the public can make Congress more operational, functional, and transparent. Renovation should not merely preserve the past; it should help Congress do its work better.

We also recognize that the legislative branch has significant security needs and that much of the Capitol campus was built in a different era. Those needs are real and must be addressed thoughtfully. At the same time, security cannot be the only principle that guides campus planning. The Capitol must remain open to the public, accessible to the public, and visibly open as the place where the American people and their representatives meet. Design choices should reflect that democratic purpose. Entrances, circulation patterns, public spaces, hearing rooms, press facilities, visitor access points, and security measures should be planned in ways that protect the institution without closing it off from the people it serves.

Finally, we appreciate the Committee's decision to hold this proceeding publicly and encourage the continued release of information that would enrich the public discussion. The Architect's draft campus master plan would be a valuable document for public review and comment when it is still possible to make alterations. So too would the Architect of the Capitol's congressional budget justifications, which, to our knowledge, have not been publicly released since 2021. Greater access to these materials would allow stakeholders to better understand the scope of the challenges, the tradeoffs involved, and the opportunities for improvement. They are a commitment to transparency from the most transparent branch of government.

Thank you again for holding this important oversight hearing and for your attention to the long-term needs of the Capitol campus. We would welcome the opportunity to serve as a point of contact on these issues and to assist the Committee, the Architect of the Capitol, and other stakeholders as this work proceeds.

Sincerely yours,



Daniel Schuman
Executive Director
American Governance Institute