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Statehouse rehab;

Capitol furniture upgrade comes at $500K

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - Illinois may be broke, but it isn't so poor that it can't afford to equip the Capitol offices of 19 state senators and a corps of legislative staffers with nearly $500,000 worth of new office furniture.

That expenditure is the latest costly piece of a controversial $50 million makeover that Gov. Pat Quinn says has turned the Illinois Statehouse into a Midwestern version of the "Palace of Versailles."

The purchases, which will mean $7,100 in new furniture for each state senator moving into a new office, are being financed through a long-term borrowing plan that means taxpayers won't finish paying for all of the new desks, office chairs, credenzas and tables until sometime after 2030.

That's a financing deal most homeowners looking for a new living room or bedroom set never would be able to secure from their lenders. And what exactly the furniture will look like after two decades - or even if it's still in use then - is anyone's guess.

When the Capitol's west wing was emptied out in 2011, furniture in most state offices was placed in storage to be reused after heating and cooling, fire-safety and handicapped-accessible upgrades and asbestos removal were complete.

Capitol Architect J. Richard Alsop III, whose office has been overseeing the renovation, said some of the old furnishings have been reused, but much of what has been in storage simply won't work aesthetically or functionally in the ornate new Capitol workspaces.

"We repurposed as much furniture as we could by reusing cubicles, cabinets, conference tables and other miscellaneous items," Alsop said in a statement Friday. "However, the designs and dimensions of the majority of some of the older pieces don't fit the specific space needs of the renovated rooms."

Alsop did not respond to a query about the rationale behind borrowing to pay for furniture, which seemingly has a much shorter lifespan than the brick-and-mortar aspects of the Capitol face lift that proponents say will last another century.

Not everyone who is moving back into the refashioned west wing is on board with the furniture purchases.

State Treasurer Dan Rutherford, a 2014 Republican candidate for governor, has refused the offering for his Statehouse offices, saying it's an extravagance the state can't afford.

"You don't go out and buy a new desk or put in a new credenza if you don't need it for functionality," Rutherford told the Chicago Sun-Times. "You use the stuff you've got. If a table leg is broken off or a desk drawer is broken, you see about repairing it, especially in the environment of today's financial situation.

"We shouldn't be spending this kind of money right now," Rutherford said, adding that he doesn't believe office furniture with its limited lifespan should be "bondable."

One of Rutherford's 2014 rivals for governor, state Sen. Bill Brady (R-Bloomington), agreed.

"I don't think anyone thinks it's rational you're borrowing for 20 years for anything that has a useful life of five to six years," said Brady, whose office is not in the newly refurbished area.

Other controversial purchases have included spending $669,000 for copper-plated exterior doors, nearly $160,000 for a pair of maiden sculptures and $323,000 more for 300-pound chandeliers in one Senate office suite, items Quinn has ridiculed as "excessive flourishes."

The project is stoking voter anger and discomfort among lawmakers because it's coming at a time when Illinois is $7 billion behind in paying its bills, lawmakers can't find a way to dig the state out of $100 billion in pension debt, and the state has the poorest credit rating in the country.

Quinn vowed to hold up funding for the next phase of Capitol construction, a refurbishing of the building's north wing that could cost upward of $140 million, and called on the legislative panel to which Alsop reports to "rein in" the architect.

On Friday, Alsop called Quinn's remarks "unfair" and said the state Capital Development Board, which reports to the governor, had the authority to block expenditures it did not like but did not. A Quinn spokesman disagreed.

Meanwhile, others who are moving into the new quarters were blindsided by how pricey their new office digs would be.

"You have more information than I do," said state Sen. Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant (D-Shorewood), when told of the $7,100 price tag for furniture in her new Statehouse office. "Obviously, when we're in a situation as we are with the state of Illinois, hearing things like this is very concerning to me."

Bertino-Tarrant's office, which originally housed the attorney general when the Capitol first opened, is in a two-senator suite that has four specially built and historically accurate chandeliers that cost nearly $80,000 apiece to reproduce.

"I had no choice of my office," she said. "I was never given a choice of anything."

Her office and those of 18 other state senators each will have a $2,095 desk, $1,605 office chair, $1,829 credenza, a $1,044 pair of guest chairs and a $501 table. The Senate tab for furniture will total $335,040, while furniture purchased for House Republican staff offices will run $137,863, Alsop said.

"Personally, if they gave me used furniture from what they had, I'm absolutely fine. Where I sit means very little to me. I've vocalized that from Day One," she said. "I understand definitely the concern when hearing this; and no, it doesn't make a lot of sense, especially when we have items already available for use."