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Latest Capitol rehab tab: $481K for lavish chandeliers, sculptures

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SPRINGFIELD - How about nearly $160,000 for a couple of replica sculptures of robed maidens and another $323,000 for a quartet of lavish chandeliers?

Those are the latest expensive showpieces drawing ridicule and embarrassment in the nearly completed $50 million taxpayer-funded renovation of the state Capitol.

The figures confirmed Friday by Capitol Architect J. Richard Alsop III for the historically accurate pieces created a new public-relations backlash for the renovation project.

Some key state lawmakers told the Chicago Sun-Times they were in the dark about decisions to outfit the Capitol with fixtures designed to look like they came out of the late 1800s but with price tags equivalent to a 2013 luxury home.

Told of the expensive bill for lighting for a state Senate office suite, one livid West Side senator said late Friday she was "embarrassed" by the spending, which comes at a time when Illinois faces a nearly $7 billion backlog of unpaid bills and a worst-in-the-nation pension system awash in $100 billion of liabilities.

"Wow, man. I'd be embarrassed if that's my office," said state Sen. Patricia Van Pelt (D-Chicago), who is due to move into office space on the Capitol's renovated second floor, where the 300-pound chandeliers are hung.

"We're not in a position to be spending that kind of money. Maybe [Alsop] had it wrong on the price. I'm just shocked anybody would spend that much on a chandelier," she said.

"But I would not want to be in that office, I can tell you that. I do not want my constituents coming in and seeing me in a space like that when people are suffering all over the state," Van Pelt said. "This is not a time for us to spend a lot of money on things like that."

The new figures were released after the close of business Friday, buried at a point in the news cycle when little attention typically gets paid to such disclosures.

They come after Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn and Republican state Treasurer Dan Rutherford launched a barrage of criticism of the renovation project, calling a three-door set of copper-clad exterior doors that cost nearly $670,000 "excessive" and "inappropriate."

The two maidens, which have been installed at the base of what is known as the Grand Staircase in the Capitol's west wing, were specially produced to match a pair that were originally conceived by architect Alfred Piquenard, who designed the statehouse in the late 1800s.

However, his sculptures were deemed too risque for the Victorian Age mindset of the era and were never erected in the Capitol. Instead, they were shipped to another statehouse Piquenard designed, the one in Iowa, where they still reside.

"Both Illinois and Iowa's capitols were designed by Piquenard in a very similar style. So, since these maidens were both conceived and constructed during the 'period of significance' for the Illinois State Capitol, it was fitting that they return to their intended location," Alsop said in a prepared statement.

The exact cost for each sculpture is $78,826.

The chandeliers, which have been hung in nearby Room 218 of the Capitol near Rutherford's office, are elaborate and resemble gas lamp fixtures that Piquenard designed and at some point were discarded by the state. The new lighting occupies Senate office space that in the 1800s housed the Illinois attorney general's office.

"Like the maidens, the chandeliers now hanging in Suite 218 were conceived by Piquenard and were originally installed in that same area when the space belonged to the attorney general," Alsop said. "It is therefore fitting that these be reproduced and installed. These new fixtures, however, are assumed much lighter than the original ones would have been."

Each chandelier in the Senate office suite costs $80,928.

Alsop stressed the sculptures and lighting fixtures represent only a "small portion" of the cost of the entire renovation, which was necessitated to provide vital upgrades to the building's once-dilapidated heating and cooling, electrical and fire-safety systems.

But the architect would not say who specifically proposed and authorized the expensive sculptures and chandeliers when asked by the Sun-Times, though multiple sources with knowledge of the renovation project have said such details were being driven out of House Speaker Michael Madigan's office - a claim a Madigan spokesman denied Thursday.

"The state acts on the recommendation of our consultants for this important renovation: a renovation to a national historic landmark in desperate need of upgrading," Alsop said, when asked who originally came up with the idea for the sculptures and lighting. "Our office works in concert with our consultants and our board to make the most informed decisions about the design direction of the project.

"[The Capital Development Board] assists in an estimating, contract, change-order review and project-management role, among many others," he said. "We work with our consultants and CDB during construction to make sure the design intent is followed. This is a very complex project requiring expert consultants and conscientious state employees - a project necessitated by deficient infrastructure, [the Americans With Disabilities Act], and life-safety systems in the building."

The remodeled wing will contain office space for the treasurer, state senators and representatives, House and Senate Republican staff and the statehouse press corps.

House Minority Leader Jim Durkin (R-Western Springs) said he, too, was "embarrassed" at the latest pricing disclosures and cited a lack of transparency in the decisions to move ahead with such costly pieces of the renovation - expenses that sources in some legislative caucuses said they didn't find out about until Friday when Alsop produced them.

"These are public funds. The press corps and the Legislature have a right to know why these fixtures were purchased and whether or not there was a bidding process," Durkin told the Sun-Times. "I'm embarrassed to say this went on without anyone's knowledge that I'm aware of. And we have some egg on our face.

"No one disagrees that we need to maintain our capital. It's a national monument. But, it's an embarrassing moment, and I think that the architect should disclose invoices and other records relating to some of these rather pricey items, which, to me, could have been purchased at Home Depot or Menards at a fraction of the cost," Durkin said.

A spokeswoman for Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno (R-Lemont), whose office is in the newly renovated wing, defended the expenditures and the project, in general.

"At this point in time, any spending on anything can be made to look extravagant," Radogno spokeswoman Patty Schuh said. "But this is part of a long-term, long-range maintenance and restoration plan for a historical building that has 200,000 people in it every year. The bulk of the project is the beyond-necessary mechanical fixes, ADA access and life-safety and fire code requirements."

But after being informed of the chandeliers' cost, Van Pelt was trying to determine late Friday whether she, in fact, may have been assigned to Room 218 in the Capitol and, if so, whether there was some way to avoid being put there so she wouldn't have to explain the lavish fixtures to her constituents.

"I don't know if I'd have power to move, but I'd prefer to be somewhere else. I'd like to reflect the vision of the people I serve," she said. "This is ridiculous."