



Fortress on the Hill

Capitol Visitor Center has 580,000 square feet underground, but officials won't say whether it is a congressional bunker

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The U.S. Capitol is spending more than \$500 million on a new underground visitor center, a high-tech fortress slated to open next year. Its location at the foot of the Capitol steps facing the Supreme Court makes it well-situated to serve visitors and, some say, to shelter lawmakers in the event of a terrorist attack.

The three-story underground structure houses hundreds of thousands of feet of fiber-optic cable for telecommunications services and additional equipment to provide wireless access, virtual screenings of House and Senate proceedings and 20 interactive kiosks for visitors to learn about the history of the Capitol and the legislative branch. The center will have a secure entryway for screening about 3 million visitors a year.

Although architects designed it before the 2001 terrorist attacks, the Capitol Visitor Center is rumored to be a haven for lawmakers, but no one will officially confirm that. The architects amended the floor plans many times to add security features after the 2001 terrorist attacks and subsequent anthrax mail threats directed at Capitol Hill offices. The lowest level of the complex is off-limits to the public.

RTKL, the architecture firm handling the project, states on its Web site that strengthened security, with a respect for free public access, is a design priority.

"The building would have to be fitted with state-of-the-art technology in order to deliver adequate security measures, material protection and multimedia use," according to RTKL's statement. The Capitol Police declined to comment on whether the facility is secure against bombs, nuclear threats, or biological and chemical incidents. Although the center contains supplies of gas masks, officials declined to say how many.

In the absence of official acknowledgment, speculation has focused on the lowest of the structure's three levels. "There's obviously a bunker there," said John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org. "How could it be otherwise? They've got a bunker at the White House, and there's a bunker out at Camp David. There are many scenarios under which you would not have time to get the Congress out of town."

"I think it's safe to say that there are security-related features that are likely to be located on the lower level," said Steven Aftergood, an analyst at the Federation of American Scientists who specializes in security policy. "It's hard to imagine that security was not foremost in the mind of the architect and planners."

Thomas Fontana, a spokesman at the Capitol Visitor Center, declined to comment on the speculation and offered no additional information. "The lowest-level floor is the home of the guts of the system," he said. "All the corridors [in the lowest level] will be secured. The public will not be able to wander into secure areas."

The 580,000-square-foot center includes four bombproof skylights that allow visitors to see magnificent views of the Capitol dome. It also features a public address system and network redundancy.

One of the most challenging aspects of the project has been integrating its information technology, said Darren Vican, an IT specialist at RTKL. "The public will be able to use all cellular services, including BlackBerries and broadband cards. They will have 100 percent coverage for all cellular phone services," Vican said.

But officials won't divulge more details about the center's IT capabilities. After speaking only in general terms about voice over IP, Vican referred security questions to the Capitol Police. Advanced Technology Systems announced that it won a \$20 million contract to provide IT support for the Architect of the Capitol, the office in charge of the visitor center project. That company will provide network engineering, network and help-desk support, and IT security planning for all congressional offices,

including a backup site in Manassas, Va.

But most contracts for the new facility are not available for public review, and Fontana declined to provide a list of companies working on the center.

In a tour conducted for Federal Computer Week, Fontana described some of the visitor center's state-of-the-art, high-tech equipment. For example, it includes cable lines that conform to tougher combustibility standards than national requirements. It has an underground delivery tunnel built to keep garbage trucks and delivery vans from sight. "You will never see a Coke truck or a garbage truck on the plaza again," he said.

Fontana declined to say whether the tunnel would be a secure entrance for the president or other officials visiting the Capitol. High-level officials must exit their cars aboveground at the entrance of the House or Senate after Capitol Police officers secure the area.

Visitors will find the plaza designed by Frederick Law Olmsted restored to its original shape, a quasihidden entrance and no indication that a new center exists underground. The center includes a 435-seat auditorium that the House and Senate will likely use when their main chambers undergo renovation in several years.

Thomas Schatz, president of Citizens against Government Waste, said the center's cost has doubled from the original estimate of \$265 million to \$559 million today. "We never saw anyone complaining about the lack of a \$559 million visitor's center," he said. "It's not being done for the visitors. It's being done for the members."

Hasson is a former editor at large at Federal Computer Week.

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