

Background: The U.S. Capitol and its stately dome have become the international symbols of our representative democracy. As the nation has grown in size and complexity, the Capitol has responded with architectural additions and technological advances throughout its 215-year history.

As the number of visitors to the Capitol grew from one million in 1970 to three million in 2000, Congress recognized the need for better visitor amenities and accessibility, improved provisions for safety and security, and better opportunities for citizens to learn about their Congress and the Capitol.



Artist's rendering of the entrance to the Capitol Visitor Center

Responding to these needs, Congress directed the Architect of the Capitol to oversee the design and construction of a new visitor center that would welcome visitors to the Capitol in an atmosphere of free and open access. Since its inception, the design for the Capitol Visitor Center has been guided by four fundamental goals:

- 1. Security** – The Visitor Center will provide a secure public environment in which to welcome and manage a large number of visitors while protecting the Capitol Building and its occupants.
- 2. Visitor Education** – The Visitor Center will establish and present lively and informative programs on the workings and history of the Congress, the legislative process, and the architecture of the Capitol.
- 3. Visitor Comfort** – The Visitor Center will provide the amenities, comfort, and convenience for visitors appropriate to the world's most recognizable symbol of representative democracy and one of the nation's most visited tourist destinations. In addition, all its spaces and resources will be fully accessible to persons with disabilities.
- 4. Functional Improvements** – The Visitor Center will respond to the physical limitations of the Capitol by providing modern, efficient facilities for such functions as truck loading and deliveries, improved connections to the Senate and House office buildings, and improvements to vertical circulation, including new elevators.

Capitol Visitor Center Facts:

- The Visitor Center encompasses 580,000 square feet on three levels below ground and includes new space for the House and Senate. The facility occupies an area that is roughly three quarters the size of the Capitol.
- The project footprint covers five acres (approximately 193,000 square feet), an area that is larger than the footprint of the Capitol Building itself.
- Excavation reached a depth of 70 feet below grade and required the removal of 60,000 truckloads of soil.
- Inside, the Capitol Visitor Center will feature:
 - **Emancipation Hall**, which will include information and ticketing desks, and provide a spacious area where visitors can gather while viewing the Capitol Dome through grand skylights;
 - a large **Exhibition Hall** will feature historic documents, artifacts, interactive stations, and films that will tell the dual story of the Congress and the Capitol;
 - two **Orientation Theaters**, which will present a specially-produced introductory film that will prepare visitors for their tour of the Capitol;
 - a new **Dining Facility** with a capacity for 530 people, and
 - two **gift shops**, which will sell House and Senate souvenirs.



The Capitol Visitor Center Exhibition Hall will feature historic documents, artifacts, models and interactive stations that will educate visitors about the Congress and the Capitol.

- **Historic Preservation:** The CVC design has, to the extent possible, preserved the historic East Capitol Grounds designed in 1874 by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who also designed Central Park in New York City. The grand views of the Capitol Dome will be restored along gently sloping and curving pathways leading visitors graciously to the Visitor Center entrances. All of the historic “hardscape” features, including lanterns, fountains and seat walls have been completed restored and returned to their original locations. A total of 85 new trees will be planted to recreate the original tree-lined paths that will now lead visitors to the Capitol Visitor Center.
- **Schedule:** Based on the current pace of fire and life safety testing, the CVC is expected to be available for a public opening in November 2008. The precise date of the opening will be determined by the Congress. Expansion space for the House and Senate and the new pedestrian tunnel to the Library of Congress will also be available when the Visitor Center facilities are opened to the public.
- **Budget:** The Capitol Visitor Center budget is set at \$621 million. This amount includes the construction of the core visitor center facilities; functional improvements to the Capitol Building, including elevators, a new truck tunnel and a below-ground loading dock facility; the build-out of 170,000 square feet of new space for the House and Senate; perimeter security measures, a pedestrian tunnel to the Library of Congress, and other tunnels connecting the House and Senate subway tunnels to the new facilities.



This aerial photo of the Capitol Visitor Center project site was taken February 15, 2008. Construction crews continue to revitalize the East Capitol Grounds as the park-like setting envisioned in the original 1874 landscape plan designed by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Tree-lined paths and grand views of the Capitol have been restored. In addition, historic lanterns and fountains have been returned to their original locations and are now fully functional features.