

Statement of James Brett Blanton

Nominee for Architect of the Capitol

Thank you Chairman Blunt, Ranking Member Klobuchar and Members of the committee. I am honored to appear before you as President Trump's nominee to become the 12th Architect of the Capitol. Before I begin, I would like to recognize and thank my loving wife, Michelle, my daughters Reilly and Kiran – Alexis our eldest daughter lives in Ohio and could not attend with such short notice. I would also like to thank my mother Ann and Grampa Steve who are in attendance. Without the strong support and moral guidance of my family, I would not be where I am today. Finally, I would like to thank you and your staffs for the comprehensive and thorough bipartisan, bicameral Congressional commission which yielded several highly qualified candidates for the President to select a nominee. I am truly honored to be that nominee.

The origins of the Architect of the Capitol are rooted in the very history of our Representative Republic and the city of Washington DC. President George Washington appointed three commissioners to provide suitable buildings to accommodate Congress. The commissioners hired Pierre L'Enfant to "lay out the Capitol City" and staged a competition for the design of the Capitol. President Washington awarded the U.S. Capitol Building to Dr. William Thornton for his design to serve as the blueprint of America's government headquarters. William Thornton is credited as the "first Architect of the Capitol", commonly called AOC.

The vision of William Thornton has been extended through ten successors. And, in fact, the Capitol has been undergoing continual construction (with the exception of a small period during the 1800's) since George Washington laid the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol Building in 1793.

Today, AOC employees work every day to serve Congress and the Supreme Court, preserve America's Capitol and inspire memorable experiences for all who visit the buildings and grounds. The enormous responsibility of these duties is not lost on me. The AOC staff is responsible to the United States Congress for the maintenance, operation, development and preservation of over 18.4 million square feet of facilities, 570 acres of grounds and thousands of works of art within the U.S. Capitol Building, the Senate Office Buildings, House Office Buildings, the Capitol Visitors Center, the Library of Congress, the Supreme Court, the U.S. Botanic Garden and the Capitol Power Plant. The historic buildings managed by the AOC host over five million visitors annually and over 30,000 daily occupants.

My Background

I bring a unique background to the Architect of the Capitol. I consider myself a “leader of change” with extensive executive experience in facilities operations and construction management in highly-visible public environments including long term master planning, project planning, sustainable design, building maintenance, physical security management and financial management. I pride myself with the ability to simultaneously develop short-term and long-range capital funding priorities for facilities across multiple locations.

Currently, at the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, I am successfully leading a \$1.5 billion Capital Planning, Design and Construction program at two of the most architecturally significant facilities in the Greater Washington DC area, the Eero Saarinen designed Terminal at Dulles International Airport and the Cesar Pelli designed terminal at Reagan National. Major construction projects at active airports involve many of the same risks and challenges experienced on the Capitol Campus. The work must occur while minimizing disruption to the tenants, occupants and the traveling public. Additionally, safety and health concerns are paramount while executing construction at locations that serve approximately 50 million passengers a year.

I am also a retired Navy Civil Corps Officer who oversaw some of the largest infrastructure projects undertaken by the Department of the Navy. I served as an advisor to two Senate confirmed political appointees in two administrations of both political parties and worked to formulate and manage Navy and Marine Corps energy, installation and environment policies relating to construction management; sustainment, restoration and modernization of facilities (including roads, piers, runways, and historic facilities); acquisition; environmental protection, planning, restoration and natural resources conservation; resiliency planning; and Safety and Occupational Health.

I was a Federal Acquisition Professional with the highest contracting warrant. I am a Registered Professional Engineer and a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. My military career offered me diverse leadership experience ranging from US and overseas installations to service in combat zones, Navy headquarters and the Joint Staff.

I fully realize trade organizations and magazines have taken a public position that the Architect of the Capitol must be an Architect. I respectfully disagree. The Office of the Architect of the Capitol needs a strong, transformational leader who has experience managing historical facilities in a customer service environment. It requires a leader who will usher in a new era of transparency and accountability to effectively maintain and preserve the universally recognized symbol of Western Representative Democracy. I am that leader.

Challenges Facing the Architect of the Capitol

Human Capital

The Office of the Architect of the Capitol has a well-deserved reputation of employing the some of the Nation's best Engineers, Architects, Historic Preservationists and skilled trades personnel. However, in recent years, there have been some leadership challenges which contribute to difficulty attracting and retaining a skilled and engaged workforce. In order to maintain the iconic facilities of the Capitol Campus, we must recruit, train and retain the best possible workforce. Unfortunately, the AOC's glassdoor.com rating (a website utilized by many professionals seeking employment) is in the neighborhood of two out of five stars. We can do better. As such, I will implement a Human Capital Strategy to address the changing workforce, ensure succession planning and train or retain our top talent. Additionally, I will have a zero tolerance policy for harassment, discrimination or unethical behavior. We cannot expect to attract the Nation's top workforce without adapting and changing our culture.

Culture Change: Transparency, Accountability and Responsiveness

Changing the culture of any large organization takes time, but any change must begin at the top and must begin by implementing a new mandate of transparency, accountability and responsiveness. The Office of the Architect of the Capitol must better partner with the Members and staff of the Senate, House and Supreme Court. Together, we all have the same goal of maintaining the Capitol Campus for generations to come. I plan to usher in this new era of stewardship. Selfishly, I view increased transparency, accountability and responsiveness as a significant benefit for me. The more you and your staff know about our projects, operations and issues, the less I will need to spend time answering inquiries about information I feel you should already have in order to perform your oversight responsibilities. I see our first opportunity to implement the new standards of transparency, accountability and responsiveness will be the planning for the 2021 Inauguration. The Inauguration is a unique and important occurrence. The world will be watching, so we ALL must work together to ensure the next Inauguration is exceptionally successful.

Fiscal Challenges

I was happy to read that the AOC earned its 15th consecutive unmodified (clean) audit opinion on the financial statements and received its eight consecutive Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting award from the Association of Government Accounts. These are no small accomplishments.

However, it is my understanding that the Capitol has a \$1.77 Billion maintenance backlog as of September 30, 2019. Although Congress and the Office of the Architect of the Capitol have a mandate to preserve the seat of our Representative Republic for future generations, it is unrealistic to think that we can afford to immediately appropriate funding to retire this backlog. I also understand that the AOC has a robust condition assessment program that meticulously categorizes the material state of each facility. I plan to utilize the existing condition assessment program as the backbone of a comprehensive Enterprise Asset Management program that will enable us to optimize projects that produce the highest rate of return for facility longevity. Additionally, a successful Enterprise Asset Management program will enable us to objectively measure a project's outcomes vs other projects to determine which investments yield the best results.

Additionally, the AOC routinely undertakes multiple major construction, renewal and restoration projects concurrently. Successfully managing multiple projects of historical facilities is always a challenge because of the high probability of unforeseen conditions once construction begins. To help mitigate the risk of the unknowns, we will need to better define the scope of each project upfront and utilize a strong project controls or change management program so Congress will fully understand the schedule and cost consequences of proposed changes.

Finally, when it comes to projects undertaken by the AOC, I plan to have a constant channel of communication between members and their staffs. As I alluded to earlier, the more information you and your team know, the less time I will spend reacting to questions and concerns; thus allowing me to focus on issues that will transform the management of the Office of the Architect of the Capitol.

Information Technology Modernization

The Fiscal Year 2019 Performance and Accountability Report indicated that cyber security is a management and performance challenge. Because the nature of cyber security measures and counter-measures are not typically discussed openly in public, I haven't fully digested the details and opportunities for improvement. I will say that I will make modernizing the information technology infrastructure and cyber security a priority. Accordingly, I look forward to briefing you and your staff about recommendations in the future.

Conclusion

I believe that the Office of the Architect of the Capitol has all the elements to succeed in its mission to serve Congress and the Supreme Court, preserve America's Capitol and inspire memorable experiences for all who visit the Capitol Campus.

Should I be confirmed, I will build upon the enormous legacy of my 11 predecessors and usher in a new era of positive change to the organization. I see the Members of Congress, the oversight committees, your staff and the Architect's office as partners in preserving the most iconic symbols of Western Democracy in the world.

Chairman Blunt, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome any questions you may have.

Biography of James Brett Blanton

J. Brett Blanton was nominated by President Trump to serve as the 12th Architect of the Capitol on December 9, 2019 after being recommended by a bipartisan, bicameral Congressional Commission. He served as Deputy Vice President for Engineering at the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority. There he led a \$1.5 billion Capital Planning, Design and Construction program at two of the most architecturally significant facilities in the Greater Washington DC area, the Eero Saarinen designed Terminal at Dulles International Airport and the Cesar Pelli designed terminal at Reagan National. Brett retired from the U.S. Navy in 2015, following 22 years of service. While in the Navy Civil Engineer Corps, he oversaw some of the largest infrastructure projects undertaken by the Department of the Navy. He is a 1993 graduate from U.S. Naval Academy and has a M.S. in Ocean Engineering from Virginia Tech. Brett is a registered Professional Engineer, a Federal Acquisition Professional with the highest contracting warrant and was awarded numerous Defense, Joint and Navy awards including the Bronze Star with Combat "V" for heroism while serving in Baghdad, Iraq.