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Things falling apart at Baltimore City Hall

Repairs to begin in summer on 19th-century building

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May 21, 2009

Baltimore City Hall is crumbling. Literally.

Chunks of marble fall from the building. Columns are cracked. Stalactite-type crystal growths adorn hidden stairwells. Last week, the corner of an old doorway collapsed.

"It is the age of the building," said Dennis Chojnowski, a project manager with the city Department of Public Works, noting it was constructed in 1875.

The city's Board of Estimates approved spending \$483,000 Wednesday in capital improvement funds to patch up the building.

City engineers first became alarmed by the weakened stone of the facade in January when preparing for President-elect Barack Obama's stop here on his pre-inaugural train tour. He was supposed to address the crowd from the portico on the second floor of City Hall.

A week before the visit, a city engineer used a brick hammer to lightly tap the facade near where Obama planned to talk, testing to see if the marble was solidly affixed.

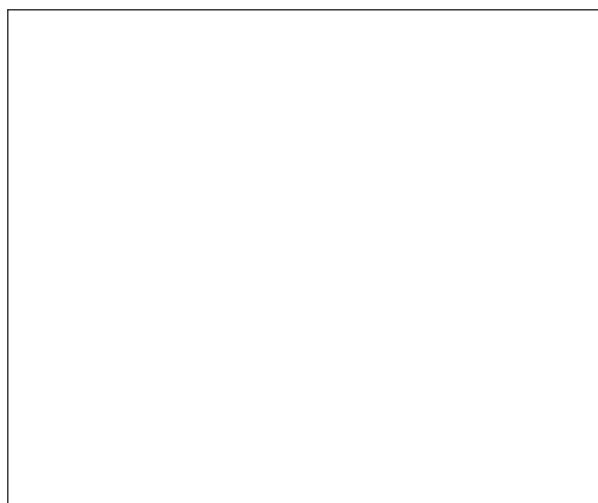
Chunks of stone tumbled to the ground. "They gave me a box of marble that had fallen off," said Chojnowski, who oversaw the design of the rehab project.

Engineers temporarily shored up the area to make it safe for Obama, although amid a flurry of City Hall corruption indictments handed down a week before the train-stop visit, Obama did not to use City Hall as the backdrop for his high-profile appearance. Instead, he spoke from the War Memorial Building across the plaza.

But the prospect of the new president not just dodging the aura of corruption surrounding City Hall but also debris falling from it created a sense of urgency among those charged with maintaining municipal buildings. Chojnowski began working with architects on a plan to restore the facade.

"It is something that we had to deal with," said Khalil Zaied, the head of the city's department of general services, who is going to oversee the repairs.

Walking on the south side of City Hall on Wednesday, Chojnowski pointed at upper-floor window ledges that



were so deteriorated he guessed that the stone would crumble in your fingers.

He noted other problems: Wires installed to prevent birds from landing on window ledges have created little cracks, allowing water to seep into the marble and deteriorate it. An overtightened bolt in a column caused a crack.

While assessing the building, Chojnowski said, a contractor found a finial, an ornamental slab of marble adorning the peak of each window, that was so loose that it was ready to fall.

The only good news is that the north side of the building has not weathered as badly and needs no repairs.

Chojnowski is something of a municipal building historian and provided pages from an 1877 manual on City Hall's construction that identifies the exterior marble as coming from the Cockeysville quarries of John B. Conolly.

The stone is "of very compact and fine grain, extreme hardness and durability," according to the manual. A train spur was added to haul the stone directly to City Hall.

Such elaborate preparations won't be needed for the repairs. Work should start in one or two months and will take about 160 days to complete, Zaied said. During that time, portions of the building will be covered by scaffolding as masons fill in fissures. They'll also fix gutters and the lanterns that adorn the building.

Except for a new roof, there has not been a major overhaul of the City Hall's exterior since the 1970s, Zaied said.



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