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It's a blast, Capitol coming clean

Janesville company using high-tech sponge system to restore white granite

By Peter Maller
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Madison - Grime pays.

A Janesville company is getting \$5.3 million to clean the white granite facade of the state Capitol and to scrub the stone walls and benches in a collection of parks surrounding it.

J.P. Cullen & Sons Inc., the contractor, is erasing more than 40 years' worth of filth and stains using a high-tech system to blast the masonry with millions of tiny sponges that can absorb dirt.

The fluffy cleaning material, about the size and shape of coffee grounds, is being fired at the building's 500,000-square-foot exterior through high-pressure hoses. The sponges, manufactured by Sponge-Jet Inc., of Eliot, Maine, have been impregnated with a mild abrasive.

"It's like when you throw a sponge at a wall at home and it sticks to the wall, then falls down," said project manager James S. Schumacher. "We're doing roughly the same thing. Every little sponge that hits the stone grabs some dirt and bounces off."

A total of 28 workers will spend about 3 1/2 months erecting scaffolds, applying sponges and tuck-pointing the granite, fixing cracks in mortar. The project was started in June on the Capitol's west wall.



Photo/Elizabeth Flores

Steven Young, a J. P. Cullen & Sons Inc. superintendent, works more than 282 feet above the ground near the the recently renovated gilded bronze Wisconsin statue atop the Capitol dome. The company is getting \$5.3 million to clean the white granite facade of the state Capitol.



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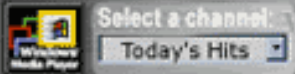
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The building is likely to look several shades lighter when work is completed, Schumacher said, as workers are to clean the stonework in the parks next year.

Preserving the building's historic and architectural integrity sparked a decision to use the slow, labor-intensive process. Rather than sandblasting or power-washing the surface, which are typical cleaning techniques for stone, architects and engineers decided it was safer to sponge it.

"The other cleaning methods are too destructive," Schumacher said. "Our goal is to leave the granite and tack and to remove only the dirt."

Construction of the ornate Capitol, which is more than 300 feet tall and spans a city block, was completed in 1917. Masons used stone quarried in Bethel, Vt., the world's only source of white granite. The sponge bath is part of a \$131 million Capitol restoration project started 11 years ago.

"The exterior was cleaned only once before - in the 1960s with an acid solution," Schumacher said. "We know today that is not the way to do it."

Project planners spent part of last summer experimenting with a variety of alternatives. They cleaned parts of a wall using water-blasting, frozen carbon-dioxide pellets and glass beads suspended in water.

Nothing works as well as the sponges, said Chris Rizzi, who works for J.S.L. Pressure Washing, of Franklin Park, Ill., a subcontractor. Rizzi, whose company cleaned Chicago's landmark Water Tower three years ago, said sponge-cleaning was the best technique to preserve old buildings.

"I've used just about every product there is," he said. "This is the right way to go. The results are unbelievable."

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