

February 26, 2009

Mr. Stephen T. Ayers  
Acting Architect of the Capitol  
SB-15 U.S. Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Ayers:

We want to commend your office for working to implement the Green the Capitol Initiative by increasing energy efficiency and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, there is a shadow that hangs over the success of your and our efforts to improve the environmental performance of the Capitol and the entire Legislative Branch. The Capitol Power Plant (CPP) continues to be the number one source of air pollution and carbon emissions in the District of Columbia and the focal point for criticism from local community and national environmental and public health groups.

Since 1910, as you know, the CPP has continuously provided the Capitol, House and Senate office buildings, and other facilities with steam and chilled water for heating and cooling purposes. The plant remains an important component of the facilities master plan and the future of the Capitol complex, and we know your office has taken steps to make the plant cleaner and more efficient. While your progress has been noteworthy, more must be done to dramatically reduce plant emissions and the CPP's impact. Since there are not projected to be any economical or feasible technologies to reduce coal-burning emissions soon, there are several steps you should take in the short term to reduce the amount of coal burned at the plant while preparing for a conversion to cleaner burning natural gas.

We encourage you to take advantage of current excess capacity to burn cleaner fuels and reduce pollution. According to the General Accountability Office (GAO) and an independent analysis from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, the boilers at the CPP are now running with more capacity than has been historically demanded or anticipated. Even with the new Capitol Visitor Center in operation, these analyses show there is sufficient capacity to further increase the burning of natural gas and still meet energy demands at peak hours.

We are also interested in identifying and supporting funding to retrofit CPP if necessary so that it can operate on 100 percent natural gas. Unfortunately, our staff has received conflicting information and cost estimates on what would actually be required to operate the CPP year-round with exclusively natural gas. If a retrofit of two remaining boilers is indeed required, then we encourage you to develop realistic budget numbers to accomplish the retrofit expeditiously including any costs for the purchase of additional quantities of natural gas. In your budget analysis, it is important to take into account that time is of the essence for converting the fuel of the CPP. Therefore it is our desire that your approach focus on retrofitting at least one of the coal boilers as early as this summer, and the remaining boiler by the end of the year.

While the costs associated with purchasing additional natural gas will certainly be higher, the investment will far outweigh its cost. The switch to natural gas will allow the CPP to dramatically reduce carbon and criteria pollutant emissions, eliminating more than 95 percent of sulfur oxides and at least 50 percent of carbon monoxide. The conversion will also reduce the cost of storing and transporting coal as well as the costs associated with cleaning up the fly ash and waste. Eliminating coal from the fuel mixture should also assist the City of Washington, D.C., in meeting and complying with national air quality standards, and demonstrate that Congress can be a good and conscientious neighbor by mitigating health concerns for residents and workers around Capitol Hill.

Taking this major step toward cleaning up the Capitol Power Plant's emissions would be an important demonstration of Congress' willingness to deal with the enormous challenges of global warming, energy independence and our inefficient use of finite fossil fuels. We strongly encourage you to move forward aggressively with us on a comprehensive set of policies for the entire Capitol complex and the entire Legislative Branch to quickly reduce emissions and petroleum consumption through energy efficiency, renewable energy, and clean alternative fuels.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

Best regards,

HARRY REID  
Senate Majority Leader

NANCY PELOSI  
Speaker of the House

###