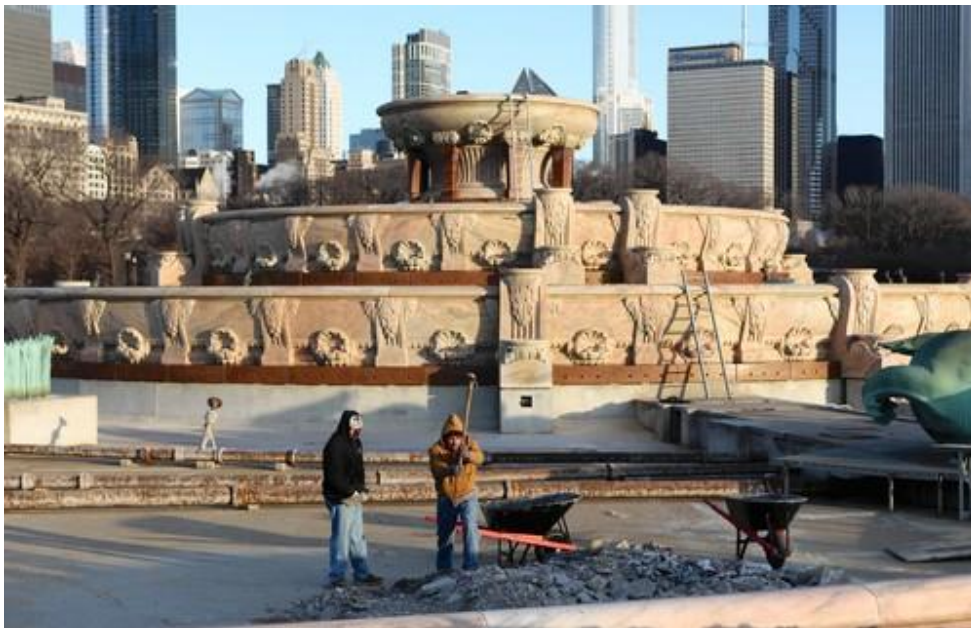


New-look Buckingham Fountain is almost ready for its close-up

By Mike Helfgot | Special to the Tribune

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Construction on the plaza surrounding Buckingham Fountain, which has been ongoing for months, is expected to be done by April 1. (Tribune photo by Michael Tercha / March 11, 2009)

The plaza surrounding Buckingham Fountain, for months a construction site as the Chicago icon undergoes the biggest renovation in its 81-year history, is nearly ready to debut its new look.

The first phase of the renovation project, which includes new landscaping and replacing the plaza's loose pink gravel with 235,000 square feet of permeable pavers, is expected to be complete next month—just in time to show off to the International Olympic Committee.

The committee is in town April 1 to assess the city's bid for the 2016 Summer Games.

The Chicago Park District expected the work would be completed in one phase when the \$25 million project was announced in July. That changed in the fall, when officials determined that work wouldn't be finished until as late as mid-summer. The fountain's water display typically runs from April to early November.

The rest of the project—renovating the fountain, rebuilding the large lower basin, creating a new pump house and treating the bronze sculptures and marble coverings—will begin after Labor Day, said John Regalado, director of capital construction for the Park District. The project is expected to be completed by May 30, 2010, he said.

"We went to a consultant to give us an analysis for a projected time frame," Regalado said. "To do it [in one phase] would have lengthened the construction to June or July. We didn't want to go into the warm weather months, so we phased the construction."

Funding the project also has proved challenging. The original plan called for \$25 million to be raised in a near-even split among the public and private sectors, \$9.8 million of which has been paid out to contractors, Park District spokeswoman Jessica Maxey-Faulkner said.

The city and Park District each pledged \$4 million, and the Park District hopes to collect another \$4 million from Springfield for the project through the state's capital bill. The city and Park District have not come up with all of their funding yet, according to Maxey-Faulkner, but she said she does not anticipate a problem there.

The state has yet to commit to the project, Maxey-Faulkner said.

Maxey-Faulkner said they are "using uncommitted capital funds" to cover \$4 million they will receive from the Buckingham Endowment in 2015 and in 2016. Kate Buckingham set aside the endowment in 1927 in honor of her brother, Clarence.

The Parkways Foundation, a private non-profit organization, has pledged \$4 million for the project and has raised \$1.3 million, according to its executive director, Brenda Palm. Another \$1 million is expected to come from the annual Lollapalooza music festival.

The plaza's 5.4 acres of pink stone and marble pavers satisfy the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act, Maxey-Faulkner said.

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