

Judge won't stop Trump's plan for \$400M ballroom

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USA TODAY

A federal judge declined to stop President Donald Trump's plan to build a \$400 million ballroom at the site of the White House's now-demolished East Wing, saying preservationists failed to meet the high bar to halt the project for now.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation filed a lawsuit in December against Trump and several federal agencies asking to stop construction on the 90,000-square-foot ballroom. The nonprofit argued that Trump should have sought Congress' authorization prior to demolition.

U.S. District Court Judge Richard J. Leon said the group did not sufficiently prove the president was exceeding his powers. Rather, it based its challenge "on a ragtag group of theories" under federal law and the Constitution.

Still, he said the court would consider additional efforts if the group decides to amend its complaint.

Leon predicted in January that his verdict wouldn't be the end of the saga.

"Whichever side wins, the other side will appeal," Leon said. "So this case is going to go to the DC Circuit, for certain, and, maybe, perhaps even to the Supreme Court. Who knows?"

On Feb. 19, the Commission of Fine Arts, a panel whose members were all appointed by Trump, unanimously approved a plan for the ballroom, clearing one of the hurdles.

The National Commission on Capital Planning, the central planning agency of the federal government, will hold a public hearing March 5. The 12-member panel, the majority of whom are Trump-appointed allies, will vote on the project on the same day.

The White House announced the construction in July and by October had launched a sudden and complete clearing of the East Wing to make way for the



The National Trust for Historic Preservation filed a lawsuit in December against President Donald Trump and several federal agencies asking to stop construction on the ballroom. SAUL LOEB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ballroom, sparking concern from critics, preservationists and a few former residents, including former first ladies Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton.

At a January hearing, Leon questioned whether the president has the authority to level the East Wing and construct the ballroom using a deliberately complicated funding setup with private money while avoiding congressional authorization.

Trump's team countered in court that the president did not need approval from lawmakers because the project is not using taxpayer dollars.

Donors include Palantir, Lockheed Martin and Meta, according to a list provided by the White House. The Trust for the National Mall, a nonprofit, is managing the \$400 million in donations for the project.

Democratic lawmakers have raised alarm about accepting funds from companies with business before the federal government.

"Trump's gold-encrusted ballroom has become a vehicle for corruption," said Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Massachusetts.

ultimately held back in January when Iranian security forces cracked down on protests, killing thousands of people in Iran's worst domestic unrest since the era of its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Since then, Trump has deployed fighter jets and aircraft carrier strike groups in the region, hoping to pressure Iran into concessions.

Several countries have begun withdrawing dependents of diplomatic personnel and nonessential staff from some locations in the Middle East, or advising citizens to avoid travel to Iran.

Pressure inside and outside Iran

The large U.S. deployment has raised fears of a wider regional conflict. In June 2025, the U.S. joined Israel in hitting Iranian nuclear sites. Iran has threatened to retaliate fiercely if attacked again.

The USS Gerald R. Ford, the biggest U.S. aircraft carrier, left port near the Greek island of Crete on Feb. 26 bound for shores near Haifa in northern Israel, where it is expected to arrive Feb. 27.

The U.S. has also sent around a dozen F-22 fighter jets to Israel — the first time Washington has deployed combat aircraft to the country for potential wartime operations, a U.S. official said.

The Trump administration has not formally announced the deployment. The Pentagon declined to comment.

Trump said on Feb. 19 that Iran must make a deal in 10 to 15 days, warning that "really bad things" would otherwise happen.

Araqchi said on Feb. 24 that Iran aimed to achieve a fair, swift deal but reiterated that it would not forgo its right to peaceful nuclear technology. Washington views nuclear enrichment inside Iran as a potential pathway to nuclear weapons.

"A deal is within reach, but only if diplomacy is given priority," Araqchi said in a statement on X.

But the sides remain sharply divided — even over the scope and sequencing of relief from U.S. sanctions — a senior Iranian official told Reuters.

Within Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei faces the gravest crisis of his 36-year tenure, with an economy buckling under tightened sanctions and renewed protests following the major unrest and crack-down in January.

President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Feb. 26 that Khamenei has banned weapons of mass destruction, which "clearly means Tehran won't develop nuclear weapons," reiterating a fatwa issued in the early 2000s.

Walters

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candidates will not be identified by party on the ballot. Candidates can still identify with a party while campaigning, however.

Why Nancy-Lynne Walters missed Anchorage school board meetings

Walters missed three straight regular meetings in September, October and December 2025, according to records attached to a Jan. 15 letter the school district's legal counsel sent to Attorney General Russell Coleman.

The letter, which The Courier Journal obtained through an open records request, notes the November regular meeting was moved, making it a special meeting. Walters said that meeting was moved upon request from another member of the five-person board.

Walters attended the November special meeting, meeting minutes show, but Kentucky law states that any board member who fails to attend three "consecutive regular meetings, unless excused by the board for reason satisfactory to it, shall be removed from office pursuant" to state law.

At the Jan. 7 meeting — when the board voted to initiate the attorney general's review — members also denied a request to excuse Walters' absence from the October meeting, which she said she missed because of her mother's health issues. She said she does not know why the board refused the request.

"I would ask them why," she said. "I mean, my mom was really sick."

The district declined to comment. Walters, who works in sales for a biotech company, said she missed the September meeting because she was out of town for work.

Her request to join the meeting virtually was not granted, she added.

Another work conflict arose in December.

Walters asked to move the meeting, but that request was also denied, she said.

Board member calls for virtual meetings

Walters said she would not be in this position if she could have joined the meetings virtually. District policy allows the board to meet virtually, and Walters pointed to board records showing links to join virtual meetings in July and August 2024.

Bill

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school tuition, tutoring and transportation.

Several states have opted into it — and sponsors such as state Rep. Kim Moser, R-Taylor Mill, and Rep. TJ Roberts, R-Burlington, argued each day Kentucky doesn't join them is another day kids in the state are missing out.

"While our Kentucky courts have misguidedly determined that state dollars cannot be used on anything other than 'common schools,' this is a federal tax credit program," Moser said, a reference to previous charter school state legislation struck down because it used state taxpayer money.

Most Democrats voted against the bill on the House floor, many of whom had passed on voting earlier in the day when it was up in committee. Several were critical of the fast-tracked process — "without giving our members here in the General Assembly or the public the opportunity to read and analyze this bill, it erodes public trust and the process. There's no need to rush this bill," Rep. Sarah Stalker, D-Louisville, said.

House Speaker David Osborne, R-Prospect, defended the bill's quick movement through the House in comments to reporters after gaveling out Feb. 24. A similar bill was filed the first day of the session, he said, and "everybody in here knew what that bill did." Arguments that the process moved too fast are "political theater," he added.

The bill drew criticism from Democrats after it was introduced, including Kentucky Democratic Party Chair Colman Elridge, who called the bill "not only an insult to Kentucky families getting priced out of health care and basic necessities — it's further proof that the Republican Party would rather build exclusive private schools for the wealthiest families than work with Democrats to improve schools serving nearly all Kentucky children."

Republicans hold an 80-20 supermajority in the House. The bill will be

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"So they do allow it. They just didn't allow it for me," Walters said.

Virtual meetings have become commonplace in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, with many nearby school districts and governmental bodies offering virtual options for both their members and the public. Walters said she supports virtual meetings as a way to accommodate the busy schedules of members and to increase transparency for taxpayers.

"If you're going to have this kind of demand on somebody that's going to be on the school board, we need to have this kind of access for people to be able to attend," Walters said, referencing the dozens of meetings the board holds each year.

Louisville Metro Council rules permit virtual participation, which Walters said will ensure she can participate consistently if elected.

Walters, elected to the school board in 2024, acknowledged she has struggled with attendance throughout her time on the board. She said she has asked for virtual meetings multiple times since her election but has been left with no other option but to miss when those requests are not granted.

"If you look at what my total attendance record is, I had trouble making a lot of the meetings because I couldn't attend virtually. I had to be out of town for work," Walters said. "I was never a no-call, no-show. I always asked, 'Can I attend virtually?'"

Jefferson County Republican Party Chair Don Fitzpatrick, who helped recruit Walters as a Metro Council candidate as Republicans push to flip seats in 2026, said the party is "100% behind her."

"Will she join some meetings via Zoom? Probably. But will she be prepared for each and every meeting? The answer is 'yes,'" Fitzpatrick said.

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taken up next in the Senate, where Republicans outnumber Democrats 32-6. Lawmakers have until mid-April to pass legislation in 2026.

Charter schools and school choice have long been controversial topics in Kentucky. Lawmakers legalized charter schools in 2017 but did not attach a funding mechanism to the bill. A separate bill with permanent funding for charter schools was narrowly approved in 2022, but that law was struck down in 2023. The state Supreme Court affirmed that decision in a ruling Feb. 19.

Rep. Adrienne Camuel, D-Lexington, brought up Amendment 2 on the House floor, but her question was cut off as the bill is centered around a federal tax program and not charter schools that use state tax dollars.

Legislators put a proposed constitutional amendment on the ballot in 2024 that would have allowed the state to spend tax money on nonpublic education, but the amendment overwhelmingly failed.

What's in Kentucky's House Bill 1?

HB 1 would put the secretary of state's office in charge of opting the commonwealth into the federal elementary and secondary education scholarship tax credit program established in 2025 in the "One Big Beautiful Bill." Kentucky's secretary of state is Michael Adams, a Republican.

The bill takes the power to opt into the program out of Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear's hands — he previously called similar legislation "unconstitutional in both where education funds can go in Kentucky and in what powers the state auditor can exert."

That comment was in reference to House Bill 88, which was introduced earlier in the session and mirrors HB 1 but would give the power to opt into the program to the auditor's office instead of secretary of state. Beshear's office did not provide fresh comment when HB 1 was filed Feb. 19 and did not immediately respond to a request for comment after it passed through the House.

As of January, 23 states had opted into the federal program.

Iran

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Washington, which says Iran is seeking the capability to make a nuclear bomb, has long sought to link the talks to other issues including Iran's arsenal of missiles and its support for armed groups in the region.

Tehran, which says its nuclear program is peaceful, has agreed in principle to accept curbs to its nuclear activities in return for the lifting of sanctions but rejects tying the talks to other issues.

Mediator Oman held out hope that Iran and the United States would make more progress at talks on Feb. 26 after exchanging "positive and creative ideas," despite U.S. concerns about Tehran's ballistic missile program.

Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi said negotiators had taken a pause after the third round of talks got underway the morning of Feb. 26, and that the negotiations would resume later in the day.

"We've been exchanging creative and positive ideas in Geneva today, and now both U.S. and Iranian negotiators have adjourned for a break. We'll resume later today. We hope to make more progress," he posted on X, without giving details.

Ballistic missiles a 'big problem'

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Feb. 25 that Iran's refusal to discuss its ballistic missile program was a "big problem" that would have to be addressed eventually, as the missiles were "designed solely to strike America" and pose a threat to regional stability.

"If you can't even make progress on the nuclear program, it's going to be hard to make progress on the ballistic missiles as well," Rubio told reporters in the Caribbean island of St. Kitts.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Esmaeil Baghaei told Press TV on Feb. 26 that the negotiations would focus solely on nuclear topics and the lifting of sanctions, and said Tehran goes into them with "seriousness and flexibility."

U.S. special envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner have been negotiating indirectly with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi. The two countries renewed negotiations this month.

Trump briefly laid out his case for a possible attack on Iran in his State of the Union speech on Feb. 24, underlining that while he preferred a diplomatic solution, he would not allow Tehran to obtain a nuclear weapon.

Trump threatened to intervene but