State moves forward with privately funded monument to unborn children

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The Tennessee Capitol on Aug. 12, 2025. (Credit: Erik Schelzig)

More than seven years after lawmakers passed legislation directing the state to erect a monument in “memory of the victims of abortion” on the Capitol grounds, the effort — while modest — appears to finally be getting into gear.

The memorial known as the "Tennessee Monument to Unborn Children" gained approval at a recent State Building Commission, to be accompanied by efforts to raise $4,000 from private sources.

Shelli King, a spokeswoman for the State Building Commission and the state architect’s office, said the monument will be similar to a Holocaust and Middle Passage memorials.

The original bill creating the new monument was sponsored by then-Rep. Jerry Sexton, R-Bean Station, and Sen. Steve Southerland, R-Morristown.

Southerland, a Southern Baptist preacher, said it is intended to “provide a quiet spot for meditation” in an appropriate setting.

After years of inactivity, Sen. Janice Bowling has taken over efforts to raise the money for the monument.

“Sen. Bowling is working with a group of donors to directly fund this monument,” King said. The location of the memorial on the southeastern part of the grounds was approved by the Capitol Commission in early 2020, she said.



Sen. Janice Bowling, R-Tullahoma, attends a Joint Government Operations Committee meeting on July 23, 2025. (Credit: Erik Schelzig)

Bowling said the granite monument is going to be “very in keeping” with the two other monuments. It will be “very unobtrusive,” she said.

“This is going to be similar to those, the monument to the Holocaust victims and the monument to the slaves,” Bowling said. “Because those three were kind of similar in the fact that they were memorializing victims.”

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The installation will look “like large tomb stones with the engraving of whatever they chose to put on it,” the senator said.

Bowling said she was asked by former Republican Rep. Bill Dunn of Knoxville, who is now an education adviser to Gov. Bill Lee, and others to pick up the project to ensure things proceeded appropriately.

“There’s prose that’s going to be on it, it’s maybe seven lines of prose that Bill Dunn actually composed,” Bowling explained. “And it really says what it needs to say and nothing more and nothing less.”

Dunn said the new monument will share a common theme with the Holocaust and the Middle Passage, the brutal, forced transport of Africans to the Americas as part of the transatlantic slave trade from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

It symbolizes what can occur “where you don’t recognize the humanity,” Dunn said. All three monuments will be tied together with connecting sidewalks, Dunn said.

As for his asking Bowling to get involved in the Monument to the Unborn, Dunn, whose wife Stacey Dunn is president of Tennessee Right to Life, quipped that sometimes the “best man for the job is a woman.”