

REPORT BLAMES FIRE ON 3 WORKERS, FAULTY PROCEDURES

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There were plenty of warning signs that all was not right with the Christmas tree that had been placed in center of the Governor's Mansion: a circuit breaker that malfunctioned on three days in early December, a charred rotary switch on the Christmas tree itself, a burning smell, a smoking wire, an extension cord that was warm to the touch.

But, with a full agenda of Christmas activities scheduled at the mansion, the seriousness of those warning signs was ignored in the two weeks leading up to the fire Dec. 15 that gutted the historic mansion. "There were errors in judgment," admitted Raylene Ireland, executive director of the state Department of Administrative Service.

On Thursday, Ireland released a committee report that places blame for the fire on three state employees who did not respond properly to the warning signs. The report also blames inadequate procedures within the state agencies responsible for the Christmas tree decorations.

One maintenance supervisor, a 17-year-veteran of state maintenance projects, has been suspended for 30 days without pay and will have his subsequent job performance reviewed for six months. Two other maintenance workers have been suspended for 14 days each without pay and also will have their job performance reviewed for six months.

"It is preposterous to identify three individuals and somehow say they carry full responsibility," Ireland said, adding the Department of Administrative Services and the Division of Facilities Construction and Management shoulder equal blame. "This department accepts full responsibility for this fire . . . and we apologize to the governor and the citizens of Utah."

But no department heads or management-level administrators were suspended in the action.

According to the report, "Even though the problems seemed to be taken care of, the nature of the indicators pointed to circumstances that were more than routine. There was a basic misinterpretation, on the part of DFCM staff, of at least two of the indicators (charred switches and warm extension cord) and the seriousness of their implications. It is reasonable to say that life/safety issues had been introduced into the mansion environment but they were not accurately identified by those who had the responsibility to be aware of and resolve such issues."

Meanwhile, Neal Stowe, director of the Division of Facilities Construction and Management, said the price tag for restoring the mansion is estimated at \$3 million. It will take four months for historical and architectural experts to assess all the damage and determine the proper strategies for restoration. It will take at least another 14 months to do the actual restoration.

The state will pay the first \$1 million of restoration costs from a "risk pool" set aside for such emergencies. The balance of the cost will be split 50-50 with International Insurance Company and Royal Insurance Company.

The state already has hired a team of nationally renowned historical architects and restorationists who will, officials hope, return the gutted 22-room mansion to its former glory.

Among the experts hired are Max Smith & Associates, the same Salt Lake firm that restored the Keith Brown mansion on South Temple, which was also destroyed in a Christmas-tree fire in 1986. The company also recently completed restoration of the Cosgriff Mansion, also on South Temple.

Timothy Hoagland, a construction consultant who also worked on the Keith Brown mansion, has been hired, as have Martin King, a Virginia expert on fire and smoke damage who is technical adviser to the National Institute of Fire Restoration; and Thom Gentle, a Virginia architectural conservator whose projects have included the Bullfinch Capitol Building in Boston, the White House and special projects for the Smithsonian Institution.

Stowe said the restoration project will involve dismantling the mansion piece by piece, cleaning the smoke and ash from between the walls, and then reassembling the structure as close to the original as possible.

It will also permit the installation of a sprinkler system and a more efficient electrical and heating system. "There will be a variety of enhancements for safety concerns," Stowe said. "The mansion is first and foremost a living residence."

State officials still shudder at the thought of "what if" the fire had occurred during one of the many Christmas events scheduled for the mansion. Those activities are generally held in the third-floor ballroom.

The fire, seeking oxygen, raced almost immediately up the grand staircase to the third floor where dozens of people could have been trapped with no way out.

The fire broke out when a faulty electrical hookup to the Christmas tree lights caused a fire that raced quickly through all three floors of the mansion, gutting the grand staircase area and severely damaging adjoining rooms with smoke. Everyone in the mansion, including first lady Jackie Leavitt and two of her children, escaped without injury.