

APNewsBreak: Idaho to return mansion to Simplots

By JOHN MILLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho aims to return the hilltop mansion to the Simplot family by June 30 in a tentative agreement over the would-be governor's residence-turned-money pit that remained vacant even as maintenance costs skyrocketed.

That's according to a resolution approved unanimously by Idaho Governor's Housing Committee Friday at a meeting in Boise.

J.R. Simplot, the deceased billionaire who built his agricultural empire, in part, on french fry sales to McDonald's, donated the home in 2004. But the fund to maintain the mansion has dwindled to just \$775,000, from \$1.5 million in 2005, as maintenance, electricity and repair costs added up.

According to the resolution, Idaho is "very grateful" for the gift but believes it's in the best interest of the state to return it.

Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise and a real-estate broker, reached the agreement with the family after beginning discussions with its representative last year.

Other members of the Governor's Housing committee, which includes four lawmakers and the head of the Department of Administration, also expressed relief at this decision.

"We do appreciate the gift, it just didn't work out, it's too costly for our budget," said Rep. Phylis King, D-Boise. "I think this is a great resolution."

Simplot's heirs originally insisted Idaho keep the place, but now are amenable to taking it back.

"We were aware of the resolution, we think it speaks for itself," said David Cuoio, a spokesman for the company in Boise.

Four days before Christmas in 2004, an elated then-Gov. Dirk Kempthorne released the big news: Simplot, who died in 2008, and his wife, Esther, had agreed to hand over the keys to the 7,400-square-foot home.

"As governors go and come, they'll enjoy it, I hope," Simplot said at the time, with Kempthorne at his side. "They won't have any trouble from me, that's for sure."

Almost immediately, assessors decided it was worth about a quarter less than original estimates, at the same time state officials concluded renovating the outdated 25-year-old home would cost much more — and take far longer — than expected.

Eventually, however, Kempthorne's plan to raise more than \$3 million to do the work fizzled at just a few hundred thousand dollars, in part because he wasn't around; in 2006, President George W. Bush named Kempthorne U.S. Interior secretary.

In the race to replace him as governor that year, the home became a campaign issue.

First, Democrat Jerry Brady opined he'd never live in a home more fit for a feudal lord than a man of the people.

The eventual winner, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, had his own issues with the place: J.R. Simplot was his former father-in-law, before Otter's 1993 divorce from Gay Simplot. After winning, the new governor decided he was more comfortable at his 70-acre ranch west of Boise.

Meanwhile, the costs were piling up: Maintenance costs of \$80,000 seemed expensive in 2007, but they're now pegged at \$180,000 for the current year: Electricity, \$30,000; replacement flags: \$5,100; janitors: \$12,000.

It was this list of never-ending bills — the tile roof is now in need of major work — more fit for the billionaire who built the place than a conservative state that prides itself on how much money it doesn't spend that eventually proved decisive.

For years, the Simplots insisted the donation was final.

In 2006, J.R. Simplot, ever the businessman, told Idaho he'd trade 40 acres beneath the home still owned by the family for state land elsewhere — where he could mine or graze cattle.

Cuoio, the spokesman, said he's uncertain just what the family now plans to do with the house, once the transfer has taken place later this spring.

Last year, it was Sen. Les Bock, of Boise, who began pushing for a final resolution for the house, including calling for public hearings. Nearly everybody who spoke favored the state jettisoning the property.

"It's the right thing to do, under the circumstances," Bock said Friday. "This is a chapter we can turn the page on."

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