

State officials, citizens debate mansion use

By Susanne Schafer

The great stone walls of the Ferguson mansion won't come tumbling down if a volunteer committee of Lincoln architects has anything to say about it.

Robert Hanna, one of five architects in the group, said Gov. J. James Exon Tuesday requested Hanna's committee to study the environs of the state capitol, which includes the Ferguson mansion.

The mansion, located at 700 So. 16th St., has been the center of disagreement among state officials and private citizens in recent months.

In June, the State Building Commission questioned whether the building is worth repairing. The mansion was bought by the state from the Ferguson family. They built it in 1906. The roof, exterior wood and front porch reportedly need repair.

The house, which has a ballroom on the third floor, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It is said to be one of the few homes west of the Mississippi River constructed in the Renaissance Revival style of the late 1800's. It was built by William Ferguson, a pioneer businessman in Nebraska, according to Marvin Kivett, director of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Kivett said he toured the mansion in the summer as part of a committee which suggested that an "adaptive use" be found for the building.

The State Historical Society has not "expressed involvement" in the matter, Kivett said, "but I would hate to see the home made into a parking lot." Kivett said the state has the potential for receiving federal funds to aid in renovation.

But in the opinion of the State Building Commission, the building "is not one that we want to preserve," according to Tom Doyle, secretary to the commission.

The commission, which includes an architect among its members, thinks the building is not unique and has no historical value, Doyle said.

He said the commission estimated it would cost between \$125,000 and \$160,000 to repair the house, excluding renovation costs. "The commission is not inclined to spend \$160,000," he added.

Doyle said the commission directed that the home's present condition, repair and renovation costs

and alternative uses be studied. George Miller, who now is overseeing the sandblasting of the Statehouse, will head the study.

The house was not purchased by the state as a historical landmark, but so the state could control the immediate vicinity of the Capitol, Doyle said.

Hanna said Tuesday the repair estimates of the commission are "fictitious and frightfully exaggerated." He said he has not been able to conduct a complete study of the house, "but it is the opinion of my committee that the Ferguson mansion ought to stay."

Hanna said saving the mansion has architectural, historical and economic merit.

"The home was built before the Capitol was. We ought to keep this touch of Nebraska heritage in the area."

Hanna said he has suggested to the governor that the mansion be used to house the state Bicentennial Commission or another state agency.

"We don't want the building to stand empty. Every dollar spent to repair it would be worth it," he said.

Although the house, in Hanna's opinion, is not a good example of the period style, he said such a building will never be built again.

"If the Building Commission tears the mansion down, I have no doubt that the area will be used only for a parking lot," he said.



Photos by Miles Theiler

Warning removed; library hazard remains

By Dave Madsen

The construction north of Love Library continues. The temporary walkway still exists, but the "Danger-Use at Your Own Risk" sign is gone. However, according to officials of George Cook Construction Co., the danger still exists.

The Cook Co. spokesman, who wished to remain anonymous, said the

sign was taken down because of the adverse publicity the walkway received in Friday's *Daily Nebraskan*.

He said a new sign probably will be posted with a less severe warning. He mentioned "Caution-Construction Area" as a possibility. The same danger still is present, however, he said.

According to Del Busacker, UNL Physical Plant construction engineer,

the sign was removed at the suggestion of the Physical Plant.

"Physical Plant reviewed the temporary walkway and deemed it to be safe for temporary use," Busacker said.

He said the sign was originally put up by the construction company "without a lot of thought as to what may have been the results."

Busacker said that he suggested to

the company that if they had to put up a sign, for legal or insurance reasons, the sign should carry only a mild warning such as "Caution."

Earle W. Brown, environmental health engineer for UNL Environmental Health and Safety said he will check the area in question today.

A state of Nebraska safety official is also expected to inspect the site.