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GOVERNOR'S MANSION

Mansion security report could remain secret

Public Safety Commission to discuss inquiry at meeting Thursday, probably behind closed doors.

By [Mike Ward](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Initial findings from an internal investigation into apparent security lapses the night of the Governor's Mansion fire may be kept under wraps, thanks to a state secrecy law, insiders familiar with the inquiry acknowledged Wednesday.

The Texas Public Safety Commission, which oversees the state Department of Public Safety that is in charge of Mansion security, is slated today to discuss the fire and the resulting investigations, including "possible action on deployment and implementation of security personnel or devices in the Capitol Complex," according to the meeting agenda filed with the Texas secretary of state.

Two sources familiar with the investigation said the commission probably will meet behind closed doors to discuss the mansion fire, citing exemptions in the Texas Open Meetings Act and Homeland Security laws that allow for such secrecy.

The rationale is that revealing details of mansion security might interfere with an ongoing criminal investigation of the fire and might compromise mansion security in the future. The two sources asked not to be identified because they are not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Commission Chairman Allan Polunsky declined to discuss specifics. Immediately after the fire, Polunsky ordered security fully reviewed at the mansion.

In public statements, Gov. Rick Perry also promised that any security lapses would be fully investigated so the public could understand what happened and why. Perry said Wednesday that press reports about security "have been rather accurate" and that mansion security needs may be reassessed.

Despite the pitch for continued secrecy, much is already known about the fire and mansion security the night it occurred. One state trooper was on duty, as there had been for weeks. Electronic surveillance equipment, including infrared sensors that would have alerted the trooper to a fence-scaling intruder, had been broken for weeks.

Investigators have said security video shows that an arsonist hurled a gasoline-loaded container at the front of

the mansion, after scaling a perimeter wall, and set the historic house ablaze.

Much of the Greek Revival home was heavily damaged. Initial restoration work started last week.

Since the fire, about 20 more troopers have been assigned to the Capitol Complex to beef up security, officials said.

Tom Smith, director of the Texas office of Public Citizen, a government-watchdog group, said the report should be made public.

"The Governor's Mansion is a public building. The DPS are public servants. We have a right to know why there was just one trooper on duty that night, why security devices weren't working properly," Smith said. "If there were systemic failures in DPS at the Capitol, we have a right to know that."

In the past, the public safety agency has kept a tight hold on all details about Capitol and Governor's Mansion security, from not making public the travel expenses of Perry's security team to fighting an order to make public security camera tapes from a hallway behind the House Chamber.

In seeking to keep details of its operations secret, the agency has sometimes lost.

In the 1990s, the agency fought in court a request from the American-Statesman to make public a report on its investigation into the 1993 Branch Davidian raid in Waco, claiming that its release would compromise national security. A court ordered the report made public, and it contained no such details.

In a related development Wednesday, officials overseeing the restoration of the burned mansion said the showcase project will include "green" components, even though the building is 152 years old.

At an afternoon news conference at the state Capitol, Tere O'Connell, a preservation architect on the project, said upgrades to the building are under consideration that would make it much more energy efficient than was planned in a \$10 million renovation under way when the fire occurred.

"We will be able to do even more of that work now," O'Connell said.

Included will be replacement of the mansion's air-conditioning and mechanical systems that were destroyed when the basement flooded during firefighting operations and additional insulation in the attic and crawl spaces.

None of those changes, O'Connell and others said, will change the outward, historic appearance of the mansion.

Among other updates on the fire cleanup, project officials said efforts to shore up the first floor are still under way, after which workers will move to the much more heavily damaged second floor.

Contractor John Braun said there is no timetable for removal of the mansion's collapsed roof and installation of a temporary roof.

Despite heavy damage to the front porch, where the fire was started, the six trademark wooden columns can be saved, officials said.

O'Connell said they have been carefully strapped to prevent further damage or deterioration as the cleanup continues.

There is still no cost estimate or timetable for the restoration, officials said.

Perry told the San Antonio Express-News and the Houston Chronicle on Wednesday that after the mansion is rebuilt, he expects to be living there again "unless it takes 'em through 2015," a reference to his plans to run for re-election in 2010. "I don't think it'll be that long."

Country performers Tracy Byrd, Marc Chesnutt and Clay Walker, all from the Beaumont area, have offered to help raise money to rebuild the mansion.


Additional material from The Associated Press.

mward@statesman.com; 445-1712

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