

“We will bring this issue before the Commission again in the future if state funds are needed, but will provide WERF the opportunity to raise funds before turning to taxpayer dollars,” DOA Secretary Mike Huebsch said in a statement.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=mg6j2mVyJPs

The outcome of that renovation project, however, doesn't answer the fundamental issue: Does Wisconsin need an executive residence at all? Are taxpayers getting their money's worth?

Linda Hughes, for one, says “yes.”

Hughes has a personal connection to the executive residence. She designs and creates the ornaments for the Christmas tree honoring Wisconsin veterans that is included as part of the mansion's holiday decorations every year.

Many of those ornaments recognize soldiers who have been killed.

And Hughes, whose cousin died in Iraq in 2005, appreciates being able to have the tree displayed in the intimate setting of the governor's residence, versus a more openly public building, such as the state Capitol.

“I know it's expensive to keep this going, but this (a soldier's death) is a family loss and (the Christmas tree honoring them) needs to stay in the family residence,” she said Wednesday during a public tour of the home.

Indeed, for a building called the “executive residence,” family life there typically takes a backseat to other events.

In requesting funds for the kitchen renovations, the DOA explained that those kitchens serve 15,000 people each year.

Even when he doesn't stay there overnight, Walker uses the residence for events — some more serious than others.

His Oct. 6 calendar, for instance, shows he was scheduled to tailgate with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. before the Illini-Badgers game.

In June, he hosted lawmakers for a “beer and brats” summit, in hopes of boosting bipartisan accord after a bitter recall election.

There's a practical argument for keeping the residence up and running as well.

Sure, Walker can commute back and forth to the Wauwatosa home he shares with his wife and sons, and it's been decades since Wisconsin has chosen a governor who hasn't already called southern Wisconsin home.

But it's conceivable that a governor could be elected from, say, Appleton or Eau Claire, cities too far away to make a regular commute logistically feasible.

The state bought the executive residence in 1949, and it's been the official home of the governor and his family ever since.

For some, the tradition alone is reason enough to keep it going.

Joanne McCormick of Madison pledged not to be political when she toured the mansion Wednesday.

"This is a holiday. This is about Christmas," McCormick said, but then added, "And it's also sort of about intimidating a governor who doesn't seem to like too many people around."

McCormick said she first toured the mansion in the 1960s, and she tries to tour it again at least once whenever a new governor comes along.

"I figure it's our home, too, and I'm proud of it," she said.

But tradition might not be reason enough to justify taxpayers footing a bill for something that perhaps has outlived its ostensible purpose, Edwards said.

He cited New York and Virginia as two states that have been debating what services their governors should continue to receive at taxpayers' expense.

"Governors mansions seem to be a hold-over from colonial times when there was a ground house for the king's representative. I'm not sure whether they really fit in a republican form of government," he said. "The president of the United States needs a special house of course — for safety and to visit with foreign leaders. But those reasons don't apply so much at the state level."