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North Dakota State U. President Resigns Amid Uproar Over New House

By Paul Fain

North Dakota State University's longtime president, Joseph A. Chapman, resigned on Wednesday amid mounting criticism over his expensive new presidential residence. State officials have called for an audit of the home-construction project, whose cost overruns have swelled the price tag to more than \$2-million, compared with a target of \$900,000

State lawmakers and members of North Dakota's Board of Higher Education have been scathing in their criticism of the home, calling it an "out-of-control project," according to news reports. And the controversy has broadened to other aspects of Mr. Chapman's compensation.

This week the university's foundation eliminated its annual deferred -compensation payments to the president, which reached \$150,000 last year. His total compensation was \$411,494. And *The Forum*, a Fargo newspaper, reported on Tuesday that the foundation had spent \$22,000 on a charter flight and hotel bills for Mr. Chapman and his family to attend President Obama's inauguration.

Mr. Chapman, who has led the university since 1999, acknowledged the criticism in his resignation letter.

"Controversies in recent days have created distractions that have made it impossible for me to provide the leadership this institution deserves," he said. "Students have always been paramount, and I fear these distractions have impaired my ability to serve their interests."

Many universities have faced backlashes over construction projects on presidential residences. Ironically, North Dakota State's problems began with a \$1-million gift.

In 2008 the William C. and Jane B. Marcil Charitable Foundation donated \$1-million each to the university and the University of North Dakota for construction of new presidential homes on both campuses. North Dakota State officials had not seriously considered upgrading Mr. Chapman's digs until the gift arrived.

The new residence was designed to be better for events, including fund-raising activities. It is more user-friendly for caterers than was the previous house, and it is handicapped accessible. But costs for the house, which opened this fall, blew well past estimates.

University officials had expected more private gifts to help cover the expense, but they never arrived because of the recession, they said.

According to a cost summary published by *The Forum*, construction hit almost \$1.4-million, while site preparation, furniture, landscaping, parking, lighting, and other details brought the project up to \$2-million.

A spokeswoman for the university, Najla Ghazi Amundson, says Mr. Chapman intentionally kept his distance from the project because he considered the house to be the university's asset rather than his personal home. "He wanted to stay as far away from the house as possible."

But Ms. Amundson says Mr. Chapman now regrets that he was not more hands-on. With three major players involved—the university, the foundation, and the architect—"nobody was really minding the store," she says

Mr. Chapman, whose resignation is effective in January, echoed calls for an independent audit of the construction project "to protect the integrity of the institution."

The fracas over the home was not Mr. Chapman's first brush with controversy. In 2006, Robert L. Potts, chancellor of the North Dakota University System, resigned after a power struggle with Mr. Chapman. The feud apparently rankled some state leaders.

However, Mr. Chapman has overseen a recent boom at the university. Enrollment increased by 7.3 percent this year and 22 percent the previous year. The state, enjoying flush times largely because of energy money, increased its biannual contribution to the university by about 21 percent.

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