

palm springs

City to rule in fight over preservation

Decision on historic designation for Town & Country Center expected

BY STEFANIE FRITH

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Palm Springs preservationists are anxiously awaiting an expected decision Wednesday by the Palm Springs City Council on the 1948 Town & Country Center.

"We are on the cusp as far as having a preservation battle in this city," Palm Springs Preservation Foundation President Ron Marshall said. "(We're about to) make a real stand for preservation."

The City Council could decide to designate the 1948 Paul R. Williams/A. Quincy Jones designed structures as a Class One Historic Site — a move that would prevent the owner from knocking them down to make way for a road.

Or the buildings could be made a Class Two site, which would allow owner Wessman Development to build a new road to drive shoppers into the proposed renovation of the Desert Fashion Plaza mall across the street.

The road would connect Indian Canyon Drive, through a remodeled Desert Fashion Plaza mall and to the Palm Springs Art Museum.

If the Town & Country Center is made historic, it is likely the mall will not be remodeled, Wessman Development Senior Vice President Michael Braun has said.

He has also said the firm won't pump any money into the center to fix it up, meaning it will remain as is — a shabby structure in desperate need of paint, new windows, floors, electrical and more.

"The focus should not be on declaring every building in this town historic, but how to generate growth in Palm Springs," Braun wrote in an e-mail.

Earlier this month, the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board voted 4-2, with Sheila Grat-tan and Brian Strahl voting no, to designate the buildings as a Class One site.

The preservationists are gearing up for Wednesday's vote with a fervor seldom seen since the 1998 battle to save the Albert Frey-designed gas station — now the Palm Springs

If you go

The city council meets at 6 p.m. Wednesday at Palm Springs City Hall, 3200 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way, Palm Springs.

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Visitors Center.

It was that win that helped Palm Springs grow its mid-century modern tourism base, Palm Springs Preservation Foundation member Gary Johns said.

National articles proclaimed that Palm Springs was hot again, thanks to its concentrated collection of mid-century modern architecture.

"If we tear down a Williams/Jones mid-century modern structure in our downtown for a street, we are ripping a hole in that tourist attraction that is Palm Springs," Johns said.

In the past few days, the preservation crowd has gathered about 500 signatures in support of saving the structures, which are home to Zeldaz nightclub, Del Sol, Grill-A-Burger, The Well in the Desert and other shops.

A handout called "Ten Myths and Facts About the Town & Country Center and Historic Preservation" also was dropped off at more than 200 businesses in downtown. More than 25 tourists at last week's VillageFest were also polled, with each one voting to save the center.

On the other side, 17 past Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce presidents have signed a petition asking for the Class Two designation.

Town & Country center owner Wessman Development is behind e-mails being sent around town touting the need to demolish the structure and create a new street instead.

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