

# Town & Country on path to notoriety

## Palm Springs shopping site nominated for historic status

By Skip Descant  
The Desert Sun

A handful of historic buildings in the Coachella Valley have cleared a major hurdle for designation on the National Register of Historic Places.

The California State Historical Resources Commission voted unanimously Friday to approve National Register nominations for 10 Albert Frey-designed buildings and the Town & Country Center in Palm Springs, the 1948 shopping com-

plex designed by Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones. The nominations can now be forwarded to the Keeper of the National Register for final approval.

"It's a major milestone — a major hurdle — but the next

step is that the recommendation from the state go to the keeper of the National Register in Washington D.C.," said Peter Moruzzi, author of the book "Palm Springs Holiday," and the architectural consultant heading up the project to recommend 10 local buildings designed by Frey to the National Register of Historic Places.

"But this is really the major milestone, because this is where the analysis is done by (State Historical Resources Commission) staff; this is where it's vetted. And if there's opposition, this is where it comes forward," Moruzzi said.

The march toward place-

Please see HISTORIC, 4A

## Historic

Continued from 1A

ment on the National Register for the 11 buildings comes despite the objection of at least two owners. The Mount San Jacinto Winter Park Authority, which is the oversight body for the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway, voted in April to oppose the designation for the tram's Valley Station, saying the historic designation might unnecessarily tie its hands when it comes to development — or redevelopment — on the Valley Station site.

Wessman Development, which owns the Town & Country Center, continues to oppose historic designation for the building. John Wessman, manager of

Wessman Holdings, who also serves on the Winter Park Authority urged fellow board members to oppose the National Register designation for the tram's valley station.

"I strongly object to this registration, and (I) am disturbed that this decision, which was already rejected by the City of Palm Springs, is raised yet again," Wessman wrote in a letter to the California Office of Historic Preservation in Sacramento concerning the Town & Country Center.

An owner's objection to being listed in the National Register will prohibit a full designation, allowing the building only to be listed as "eligible." If a property is determined to be "eligible" for the National Register, although not formally listed, "it will be given the same

protection as a listed property in the federal environmental review process," according to official regulations by California Office of Historic Preservation Department of Parks and Recreation. However, it does not yet qualify for federal tax benefits until the objections are withdrawn and the property is actually listed, state preservation officials say.

Wessman argues that the building is a poor example of mid-century architecture and is problematic to lease due to its awkward layout, low ceilings and other deficiencies. The building also stands in the way of a proposed new street for the area that would form an east-west axis connecting the Palm Springs Art Museum with other

Please see HISTORIC, 5A



STAFF PHOTO

Palm Springs Fire Station #1(401), located at 277 N. Indian Canyon Drive, was designed by architects Albert Frey and Robson Chambers in 1957. The building is one of handful in Coachella Valley nominated for history status. The colors of the corrugated aluminum and the concrete block are complimentary to the desert and are Frey's signature elements.

# Historic

Continued from 4A

areas like the Palm Springs Convention Center.

In June 2009, the Palm Springs City Council unanimously rejected a recommendation by the city's Historic Site Preservation Board to name the Town & Country Center as a Class I Historic Site.

"I think this is the least impressive work of the architects," Lee Weigel, then a Palm Springs City Council member, said at the property's lengthy public hearing. Weigel echoed the thoughts of developers and others gathered when he said the building lacks architectural significance.

"It's an interesting piece of work. It has some very interesting features to it," said Councilmember Chris Mills at the time. "But the whole piece of architecture, what we're talking about here, to me, is not nearly the overall quality of the work you see in either of these architects."

"It doesn't reflect the quality of architecture that denotes a Class I," he added.

Despite the objections to the historic designation, council members were careful to say their comments should not be misinterpreted as a call for demolition.

"We are not saying, tear this building down," Mills reiterated that evening. "We are saying, it is not a Class I. That's a very, very important distinction, and one that people need to understand."

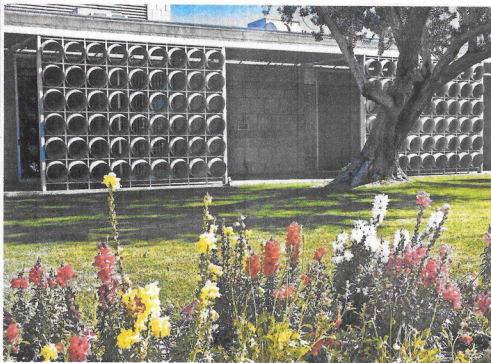
Mills said his comments today would not be any different than they were six years ago.

"There is some historical significance to the building," Mills said via email Tuesday. "At the time, I suggested a Class II designation but that was not supported."

"I'm a preservationist by nature and it would be an incredible tragedy to tear this down," said Ginny Foat, a member of the City Council at the June 2009 meeting.

"However, that's not what is before us tonight," said Foat, now a candidate for mayor.

Local preservationists who were part of the 2009 fight to have the Town & Country Center given protective status, say the city may have had its eyes more on what was across the street — a largely defunct shopping mall known as the Desert



STAFF PHOTO

A series of five sun breaks, an Albert Frey signature design element, supports the metal overhang at the front of Palm Springs City Hall.

## ALBERT FREY BUILDINGS NOMINATED FOR THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Frey House II — Palm Springs  
Palm Springs Fire Station No.1 — Palm Springs  
Sieroty House — Palm Springs  
Carey House — Palm Springs  
Loewy House — Palm Springs  
Palm Springs City Hall — Palm Springs  
Tramway Gas Station (Palm Springs Visitors Center) — Palm Springs  
Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Valley Station — Palm Springs  
North Shore Yacht Club — Mecca  
Kocher Samson Building — Palm Springs

Source: Staff Report



JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN  
The Tramway gas station building, designed by architects William Frey and Robson Chambers, is located on Highway 111 at Tramway Road.

### Fashion Plaza.

The mall property was also owned by Wessman Development and the city desperately wanted the site redeveloped, a project in full swing today, six years later.

"Council denied the class I status to appease Wessman to get the downtown project jump-started," said Gary Johns, a member of the board of directors for the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, recalling the events at the time. "It would

be years later before the downtown project was actually jump-started."

Those most familiar with the project said it's a new time and there is reason to be hopeful that the latest move by the state preservation board will open a new chapter toward the Town & Country's renovation and preservation.

"I am confident that it will carry on to be deemed eligible for the National Register," wrote Susan Secoy-Jensen, a

member of the Palm Springs Architectural Advisory Committee who has been closely involved in the Town & Country's nominating process.

"Friday's hearing was very encouraging. I don't know how the Palm Springs City Council

could review it the same today, with such powerful testimony of the Town & Country Center's integrity. Friday's hearing was such a positive effort towards the ultimate preservation and rehabilitation of the Town & Country Center."