

## Historic Site Preservation Board pans proposed revamp of Welwood Murray Library

Mariecar Mendoza • The Desert Sun • October 13, 2010

Local historic preservationists rejoiced Tuesday after a city board rejected a proposal they said would have damaged the historic characteristics of one of Palm Springs' oldest civic buildings.

The Historic Site Preservation Board (HSPB) voted 5-1, with Chairman John Gilmer opposed, to deny a certificate of approval for a proposed remodel and expansion of the Welwood Murray Library, 100 S. Palm Canyon Drive.

Board member Sheila Grattan recused herself, citing a business relationship with the Friends of the Palm Springs Public Library, which worked on the project designs as part of a city subcommittee.

"Hopefully, the HSPB's decision brings us one step closer to the sensitive restoration of this historically and architecturally important building," said Ron Marshall, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

Tuesday's decision is the final say on the proposed project and essentially stops the project unless someone appeals the decision to the City Council, said Director of Planning Services Craig Ewing. An appeal may be made by a council member.

But City Manager David Ready added that regardless of whether there's an appeal, the City Council needs to give city staff some direction on remodeling the building in order for the library to reopen, which could include submitting a new design proposal.

The Welwood Murray Memorial Library, designed by the city's first resident architect, John Porter Clark, is named after George Welwood Murray, who along with Cornelia White gift-deeded the property to the city in 1938, according to a city staff report. It was designated a historic site by the city in 1984 and, according to the deed, must be used as a library.

"I'm disappointed that the city staff — that the subcommittee, that the library, the library board — lacked appreciation for the authenticity of this building," said Barbara Marshall, board vice

chairwoman and wife of Robert Marshall, before making a motion to deny the proposal. "This is not a dilapidated building on the wrong side of the tracks begging for some kind of a new life. ... This building is sitting downtown, pretty much intact and could be a beautiful historic resource restored for the community to embrace."

The board's concerns with the design included the proposed demolition of the Billie Lu Floan Room to make room for a 1,589-square-foot building extension that would encroach on the site's existing courtyard, and the remodel of the building's interior that would add restrooms and a small community room.

Palm Springs-based Escalante Architects, the firm hired by the city, worked on plans for the project since last year in collaboration with representatives from the Palm Springs Library Board, Friends of the Palm Springs Public Library and councilmen Chris Mills and Lee Weigel.

"The city and Escalante Architects put a lot of work into that plan and to deny it off the top without getting more feedback, I thought, was a little unfair," Gilmer said of his dissenting vote.

Gilmer specifically wanted an environmental impact report (EIR) — which would address potential problems such as traffic, air quality, noise and ways to alleviate any of those issues — even though the project is not required to have a report per the California Environmental Quality Act.

"I felt we could have used the findings of an EIR to actually make a better, informed decision," Gilmer said.

The city subcommittee is expected to meet next week to discuss its next move, Ready said.