

Study: Building not 'historic'

Preservationists: Report for school district biased

By **Mariecar Mendoza**
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PALM SPRINGS — A new study that concludes a 55-year-old building by two renowned midcentury architects does not qualify as a historic resource is being touted by those who want to demolish it for a new facility.

Riverside-based architectural historian Pamela Daly completed the historic resources assessment report on the Ramon Academy building this month amid tensions between local preservationists and school officials over the building on the Palm Springs High



A recent study states that the old Palm Springs High School Administration building, now used by the Ramon Academy, does not qualify as a historic resource. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

School campus. It was designed by Donald Wexler and Richard Harrison.

The district plans to level the structure this year to make way

for a 9,000-square-foot Performing Arts Building that will be utilized by more than 400 students who will participate in the popular program in the coming years.

The project is estimated to cost \$4 million.

"We were just dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't' to make sure we didn't miss anything," said Palm Springs Unified School District Board of Education president Richard Clapp. "Now we can continue to move ahead."

The report presented to the Palm Springs Unified School District Board of Education concludes that the building, while originally constructed with elements of quintessential midcentury modern architecture, does not present any historic significance.

"Due to substantial and permanent alterations made to the building in 2000, and the removal of character-defining features, such as windows and doors, the building has lost its integrity of design, materials, workmanship, and feeling," wrote Daly.

The report notes that the renovations were designed by the local firms of Donald A. Wexler Associates and James Cioffi Architect.

The report also says that the building fails to qualify as a historic resource under federal and state criteria.

But the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, which had representatives present at Tuesday's meeting, say the report is skewed.

"This Historic Resources Assessment Report was written by someone who was told, probably not directly, but certainly indirectly, to reach a foregone conclusion. A conclusion that would give this board of education cover for their big mistake," Palm Springs Preservation Foundation president Ron Marshall told the board.

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Furthermore, Marshall said the report doesn't present anything new and instead reiterates what the foundation has been telling the district with one caveat: it "substitutes our phrasing of 'qualifies under this evaluation criterion' with the expedient and convenient 'does not qualify.'"

"The public will see right through this paid report for what it is: a callous and transparent attempt by the board of education to rationalize their poor decision," Marshall said.

Clapp did suggest that if the foundation is intent on saving the building, the organization should buy it and move it off the school campus.

"I felt obligated to say that while we're not going to take more public funds or any more time — because this is best for our kids, our fi-

nances and the building doesn't have historic significance — it's an option," Clapp said.

Marshall said not only is that option expensive, it would compromise the building.

He also emphasized that the district is the steward of the building and should not "push that stewardship responsibility onto another organization when there are simple ways to reuse the building."

Construction for the Performing Arts Building is to be partially funded by Measure E bond money that will be made available June 27.

After that date, the district has 90 days to award the construction contract or lose the \$874,416 it anticipates the State Allocation Board will award for the project, officials said.

"Bottom line is that I guess the board of education thinks that one outside expert, paid by them, has more credibility than the 22 archi-

texts we had sign the Architects' Open Letter," Marshall said, referring to a letter the preservation foundation sent to the district in April that was signed by local architects from William Krisel to Lance O'Donnell and Ana Escalante.

The board is not expected to take action on the issue until later this summer when it considers a contractor for the project.

Construction for the new Performing Arts Building is expected to begin in the fall with completion set for December 2013.

"This isn't being done out of malice. We have great respect for Donald Wexler," Clapp said.

"The reality is we want to construct something that'll benefit our kids for years to come."

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