

Council endorses La Serena preservation

BY STEFANIE FRITH

stefanie.frith@thedesertsun.com

A 1930s-era former hotel enclave in Palm Springs is another step closer to status as a historic site — a move preservationists believe would prevent demolition and save the neighborhood's charming character.

The La Serena Villas at 339 S. Belardo Road in the Historic Tennis Club Neighborhood was recommended as a Class One Historic Site on Wednesday by the Palm Springs City Council. Mayor Pro Tem Chris Mills voted no.

The resolution will come back for a formal vote at a later date.

Demolition permits can still be pulled, but they are subject to City Council approval, City Attorney Doug Holland said.

"You can loudly and clearly say this is a historic property and it matters," said Ron Marshall, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. Class One designation

gives the owners two choices: restore it or sell it, Marshall said.

Former Historic Site Preservation Board member Shelly Saunders said history would not be lost, however, if La Serena Villas is knocked down and designated as a Class Two Historic Site, as was recommended by city staff. Class Two allows for demolition and the preservation of documents and a plaque on the site.

"Records and information will be kept for years by the city," Saunders said, as several in the audience sighed and shook their heads in disbelief at her words.

Some City Council members said they understand that they can't force the owners to refurbish the property, but they believe it is restorable and historic.

"The small hotels are so important," Councilman Rick Hutcheson said. "As long as there's a chance some of these



PALM SPRINGS SUN FILE PHOTO

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precious resources can be saved (we should do so)."

Michael Gonzales, an attorney for the owners, argued that his clients do not believe the property is historic.

In 2004, the owners of La Serena Villas were granted permission to renovate the property. Work was started but never completed. Last year, the owners filed an ap-

plication to demolish the hotel — which is comprised of bungalows.

A stay of demolition was issued by the City Council in July, and in November, the city's Historic Site Preservation Board recommended Class One designation of the .9-acre site — which would protect it from razing.

City staff recommended Class

Two designation because it says the buildings are "in such a dilapidated state that the restoration may not be feasible" and the current condition contributes to neighborhood blight.

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation recently asked Lance O'Donnell to study whether restoration was still possible for La Serena Villas. O'Donnell served as the architect for the project when it was approved for a remodel in 2004.

O'Donnell wrote in his report that in 2005 the property was "well on its way to becoming a fully restored collection of eleven uniquely scaled bungalows — seamlessly integrating into the fabric of the Tennis Club neighborhood. Today there is little that has occurred to prevent anyone, with the proper commitment, from completing the rehabilitation and restoration of the property."