

Future of historic library in limbo

Public hearing pits backers of revamp against preservationists, descendants

BY MARIECAR MENDOZA

The Desert Sun

One of Palm Springs' oldest civic buildings has become a battleground in the fight between historic preservationists and those who want to convert the historic facility into a relevant resource for a new generation of patrons.

The Welwood Murray Memorial Library's proposed renovation and expansion will be discussed during a public hearing at the Palm Springs City Council meeting today. The item comes as an appeal, filed by City Councilmen Chris Mills and Lee Weigel, that challenges the Historic Site

Preservation Board's Oct. 12 denial of the renovation plans.

Mills and Weigel are on the council subcommittee that has worked in collaboration with Palm Springs-based Escalante Architects, the firm hired by the city, and with the Palm Springs Library Board and Friends of the Palm Springs Public Library on the project since last year.

"We feel it's important that the building function for the use that's going in there, which is a modern library with different needs and different uses than a library of the past," Mills said Tuesday.

If you go

What: Public hearing on the proposed renovation and expansion of the Welwood Murray Library at 100 S. Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs

When: 6 p.m. today during the Palm Springs City Council meeting

Where: City Council Chambers, 3200 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way

Information: (760) 323-8299

The 4,030-square-foot Welwood Murray Memorial Library, designed by the city's first resident architect, John Porter Clark, is named after Palm Springs pioneer George Welwood Murray.

Murray, along with Cornelia White, gift-deeded the property to the city in

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CRYSTAL CHATHAM THE DESERT SUN

The city of Palm Springs is in talks with the Welwood Murray Memorial Library in the downtown corridor to convert it into a branch of the city's public library.

LIBRARY: Downtown Welwood revamp plans trigger debate

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1938. It was designated a historic site by the city in 1984 and, according to the deed, must be used as a library.

While the Historic Site Preservation Board agrees that the site should be used as a library, the board prefers to use it more as a "research library/museum facility ... using the layout, materials and furnishings of the original building," according to a city staff report.

But David Gray, president of the Board of Library Trustees, argues that the idea of using the library's card catalogue, circulation desk and other original furnishings is just not in sync with the new direction of libraries.

"Putting elements back into the building might make a quaint movie set, but people don't use those things anymore," Gray said.

At the heart of the debate, however, is 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.

"The subcommittee feels that it's important for the function for this branch to be able to have the expanded space or it really doesn't make sense to do this," Mills said, adding that the subcommittee has been "very adamant" about keeping exterior modifications minimal and unnoticeable from the street view.

But local residents and organizations such as the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation share the board's concerns and feel the historic characteristics of the building should be respected inside and out.

"I am 100 percent in favor of adaptive reuse of the existing Welwood Murray Library ... adaptive reuse is a wonderful thing and I don't know a single person in the preservation community that doesn't want to see adaptive reuse of the existing building," said Palm Springs Preservation Foundation board member Gary Johns. "But there is no good reason for this appendage on the back of the building."

Descendants of Murray have sent letters to city officials to voice their opposition to the

proposed plans, calling it "not a renovation, but rather an unsympathetic and unnecessary remodeling."

"This proposal is an affront to this historic, and architecturally important, building," wrote Phillips Welwood Murray in a letter to the council dated Aug. 12.

On Tuesday, the elder Murray's great-grandson reiterated that sentiment.

"I just don't think the building should be changed from what it was originally ... sure it should be spruced up, but to change it around is not what I think is best," he said. "Why can't it be a modern, functioning library in the same layout it is now?"

Phillips Welwood Murray, who currently lives in Palm Desert, plans to attend today's meeting.

"I think it's very important to keep an open mind," Weigel said. "Nobody wants to destroy the building. Nobody wants to knock it down. Nobody wants to deface it or change its exterior facade. So I think it comes down to what observations do other folks have when it comes to this building and try to figure out what's best for the community."