

DESERT FASHION PLAZA

City alters mall plan again

Town and Country Center wins reprieve in bid to court preservationists

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The Desert Sun

The Town and Country Center—a flashpoint in the debate over how to revive downtown Palm Springs—won at least a temporary reprieve from demolition on Friday.

Aimed at building support for a tax measure to help pay for the reconstruction of the empty

Desert Fashion Plaza, the change does not necessarily save the center. But it does exclude the building from the immediate discussion on how to rebuild the mall.

Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet and Councilman Chris Mills told The Desert Sun that the project financing agreement between mall owner John Wessman and the city, ex-

pected to be presented to the City Council on July 20, will no longer include the 63-year-old Town and Country Center, which some preservationists deem a historical asset.

Instead, city officials want to focus solely on what Wessman has dubbed the Downtown Revitalization Plan, which focuses on the four

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main blocks west of Palm Canyon Drive. The latest move excludes the east-west street from Indian Canyon Drive that was planned to go through the Town and Country site.

Mills, who serves on the council subcommittee for this project with Pougnet, said that the decision was made to help gain support for a proposed tax measure slated for November's ballot.

The measure would ask voters to approve a tax increase, likely a sales tax hike, to help fund the public portion of the Desert Fashion Plaza project which includes more than 1,000 parking spots, new streets and two parcels for the future expansion of the Palm Springs Art Museum.

"It's important that the voters approve that (tax), and I think it's important that any other issues don't cloud what's most important, which is to revitalize the Desert Fashion Plaza," Mills said.

Preservationists who have been lobbying to save the Town and Country Center for years rejected in the news.

"This is a very intelligent move on behalf of the city because it makes sense that the redevelopment of downtown benefit the entire community," said Gary Johns, vice president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

Johns, fellow foundation members and more than a dozen others spoke out in favor of the preservation of the center during the City Council meeting Wednesday as part of a years-long effort to save the building, which once housed restaurants and stores but is now empty and dilapidated. Wessman owns the building.

"We made a very good ar-

gument in regard to the revitalization of Desert Fashion Plaza and restoration of the Town and Country Center and I think that resonated with the council and Wessman," said foundation president Ron Marshall.

The Town and Country Center was designed in 1948 by Los Angeles architects A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams. Williams was the first black member of the American Institute of Architects, according to the National Organization of Minority Architects.

But the fate of the center is not completely certain and preservationists know it.

The Town and Country Center is still included in the Museum Market Specific Plan, the blueprint for the project adopted in 2009, which means that the ultimate elimination of the building can still happen after the completion of the Downtown Revitalization Plan.

"The ideal scenario is to get it saved now and for the future," said Mark Davis, member of both the preservation foundation and Palm Springs Modern Committee. "But this is a step in the right direction."

Davis added that at the very least it eliminates what has turned into a contentious battle between preservationists and others who argue the center is a necessary sacrifice for the overall project. The issue came to a head at a two-hour debate at Wednesday's council meeting.

Marshall said he hopes the announcement re-energizes interest in the building, maybe even prompting outside developers to purchase the building from Wessman to save the center once and for all.

But as of Friday, Wessman said he hasn't even thought about selling the property.



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The Town and Country Center was designed and built in 1948 by A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams in the late modern style, which some preservationists say contributes to the midcentury character of downtown Palm Springs.