

Palm Springs City Council to mull affordable housing project

Marcel Honoré • The Desert Sun • May 19, 2010

The fate of a hotly debated Palm Springs affordable housing project, proposed to go up next to a cluster of historic mid-century modern steel homes, likely will be decided today.

The Palm Springs City Council will take up an appeal by Santa Monica-based Community Dynamics — after the developer's planned 51-unit town home project for moderate-income residents was denied last month by the city Planning Commission.

"We think there's a lot of good reasons for the City Council to approve this, and that's what we intend to focus on" at today's hearing, Community Dynamics Vice President for Development Stephen Roberts said Tuesday.

The project, slated for 3.6 acres of city redevelopment agency-owned land at Indian Canyon Drive and San Rafael Road, has endured more than a year of meticulous public review and vocal opposition.

Local preservationists and the owners of the neighboring steel development homes, designed by famed local architect Donald Wexler, are worried about their privacy, mountain views and the project's density.

However, Community Dynamics has a contract with the city to design and seek entitlements for an affordable housing project at that site, Palm Springs' Director of Planning Services Craig Ewing said.

The 51 affordable units are counted toward Palm Springs' long-term housing goals set by the state, Ewing added.

Palm Springs must plan for 1,310 additional affordable housing units for residents ranging from moderate to extremely low income by 2014, he said.

Additionally, the city's redevelopment agency must devote 20 percent of its tax increment funds toward affordable housing.

How all that will factor into the City Council's decision — if at all — remains to be seen.

Palm Springs Preservation Foundation President Ron Marshall argues the project would hurt Palm Springs' mid-century modern tourism.

The seven historic Class One designated steel development homes, on Palm Springs' north end, "have collectively risen to the level of a bona fide cultural tourist attraction," Marshall wrote in a May 8 letter to Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet.

"The city has committed an error of omission by failing to re-evaluate the zoning ... as the historic and architectural importance of the Steel Development Houses has emerged," Marshall's letter stated.

Community Dynamics has made design changes to address some of the concerns — but it needs the 51-unit density to pencil out as an affordable-housing development, Roberts said.

That density is allowed under city zoning.

Earlier this year, during an interview for the "Wexler Weekend" celebration held in January to honor the architect's work, Wexler said the neighboring steel development houses had been designed to serve as affordable housing.