

Vote backs building owner

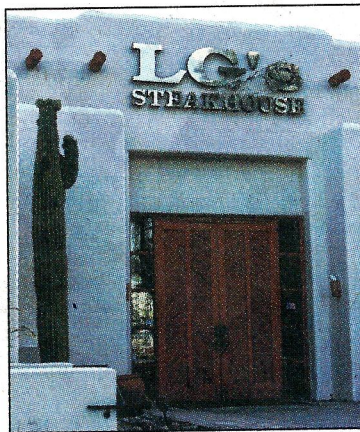
Former Desert Magazine facility to be remodeled

By Blake Herzog

The Desert Sun

PALM DESERT — A remodeling of the former Desert Magazine building was approved by the Palm Desert City Council on Thursday night, over the protests of prominent local historic preservation advocates.

The council voted 5-0 to allow owner Sam Rasmussen to move forward with changing the 64-year-old building's doors and windows, adding a second patio and stone columns, along with removing the wooden posts, or peelers, that adorn the front of the facade and are characteristic of the Pueblo Revival style it was built in,



Alterations to the building at 74-225 Highway 111 in Palm Desert have been approved.

DESERT SUN FILE PHOTO

among other changes.

"Those things that we did were our way of being respectful to the architecture while making it more

leaseable for the owner," said the project's architect, John Vuksic.

Kim Housken, who chairs the city Cultural Resources Preservation Committee, said the building has long been considered a candidate for historic designation at the state and county level once it got old enough, and argued the council is required under the California Environmental Quality Act to consider whether the building meets one of four criteria for determining historic status.

"No one has determined it's not eligible. It needs to be evaluated," she said.

Ron Marshall, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, called it "the most historically important commercial building in all of Palm Desert," and implored the council, "Please don't allow this building to be treated like a 7-Eleven or a dollar store."

The building at 72-225 Highway
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VOTE

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111 has housed restaurants for the last 20 years; LG's Prime Steakhouse and Kaiser Grill moved in around the same time, and a Kaiser-owned seafood restaurant, Big Fish, closed about five years ago. LG's shut down just over a year ago.

The 17,000-square foot adobe-styled structure was completed in 1948, built by Randall Henderson as the new headquarters for his Desert Magazine, which had been based in El Centro. Henderson and his brother, Clifford, are considered the founders of Palm Desert.

The magazine was considered to be a competitor to National Geographic and popularized a kinder, gentler view of deserts as something other than barren wastelands.

The changes to the building were approved in July by the city's Architectural Review Commission.

Vuksic sits on the commission, but abstained from that vote.

That vote would have been final if Mayor Pro Tem Bill Kroonen hadn't called it up for council review after talking to members of the historical commission, but he and the other council members all said the changes should be allowed to go through.

"I can't see that we're doing a great deal of damage to the history of Palm Desert by making it viable and usable to the owner," said Councilwoman Jean Benson, who said she couldn't remember hearing any

protests when the building was remodeled to accommodate the restaurants.

According to a city staff report the building is on Palm Desert's "Unofficial Current Investigation Site Listing" of potential historic sites, and Riverside County's list of locations that "need to be evaluated" for historic value.

Under city code permission of a property owner is required for it to be considered for historic status.

Rasmussen stated in a July letter to City Planner Kevin Swartz he doesn't want a historical designation for the building.

His limited liability corporation, One El Paseo West, has owned the Desert Magazine structure for 14 years, and he built the office buildings that stand on either side of it in 2001.

After the meeting Rasmussen said he would apply for building permits from the city quickly, and "we're hopeful we'll have two restaurants opening there by February of next year."

He said he appreciates the value of the building, and particularly its ties to Desert Magazine, which helped change perceptions of the desert. "It was a publication that meant so much to so many people for many years," he said.

Marshall, who described himself as "spittin' mad," said he'd have the board of the preservation foundation discuss the possibility of legal action against the city.

"Obviously, the City Council was more concerned about keeping one property owner happy than it was about preserving this important building," he said.