



This rendering shows the planned design of a 9,000-square-foot performing arts building to be built after the demolition of the existing Palm Springs High School Administration building. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS UNIFIED HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Plan to destroy building creates controversy

School's idea for new art facility may be stalled by local foundation

By **Mariecar Mendoza**

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PALM SPRINGS — Preservationists and school officials are at odds over a midcentury modern building slated to be demolished for a new art facility.

The Palm Springs High School Administration Building is set to be leveled this summer to make way for a new 9,000-square-foot Performing Arts Building.

The estimated \$4 million project aims to provide:

- A new band room
- Small practice rooms
- An audio recording studio
- Changing rooms for the band and Black Box Theater performers
- Student restrooms
- Instrument and costume stor-

age for theater productions

Julie Arthur, executive director of Facilities Planning for the Palm Springs Unified School District, said the new building is necessary for the school's growing performing arts program, which currently has nearly 200 students participating in the band program alone.

But the project may be stalled as the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation is fighting to save the 55-year-old building designed by midcentury modern architects Donald Wexler and Richard Harrison.

The foundation found out about the planned demolition nearly a month ago, which prompted members to do research on the site before sending letters to the district March 13 and March 21 urging officials to reconsider.

"With sustainability and 'green' principles at the forefront of construction and development strategies, it was an oversight not to more aggressively pursue the adaptive reuse of the PSHS Administration Building," Marshall

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wrote in the letter.

“Our experience has shown that there is rarely a good reason ... to demolish a solid and perfectly serviceable building only to replace it with an unremarkable substitute.”

Arthur says that while the school knows of Wexler's contributions to the school and the revered midcentury modern architectural reputation of Palm Springs, the administration building isn't an example of Wexler's signature work.

“It's a block building that's really not under his area of expertise,” Arthur said, referring to Wexler's signature steel-framed buildings.

Marshall said that stance is “an extremely narrow view, and shows the lack of understanding of Wexler's work.

“I had three architects tell me this is a good building with high integrity and is a great example of midcentury modernism,” Marshall said, emphasizing that the building has the glass, steel and concrete elements fundamental to midcentury modern architecture.

“Even if it wasn't designed by Wexler, it stands on its own merit as a great modernist building. Wexler is



The Palm Springs High School Administration building is slated to be destroyed to make way for a new art building. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

just a bonus.”

In 2008, the district conducted a review of needs at Palm Springs High School, which included exploring renovations to the existing building, Arthur said.

“We looked at this building first to see if we can renovate it to make it fit our needs but the cost really prohibited that option,” Arthur said.

Instead, she said the district decided it would be best to construct a new building that “connects the look we already have on Ra-

mon Road.”

The proposed building is expected to have arches similar to Ramon Academy, the alternative school on campus.

Marshall takes issue with the rationale.

“We think if they're committed they can come up with a better plan,” Marshall said. “There's no reason that everybody can't win.”

The foundation says it will propose that school officials look at other sites on campus for the new building.

“There's plenty of less important architecture on the grounds of Palm Springs High School that can be sacrificed,” Marshall said.

Palm Springs Unified School District and Palm Springs Preservation Foundation officials are scheduled to meet Friday to discuss the foundation's concerns.

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