

Some say timeframe for completion too long; city still could opt to go forward

The Desert Sun

The Palm Springs Planning Commission voted 3-1 Wednesday to reject a draft development agreement between the city and Wessman Development on the Museum Market Plaza, which includes the long-vacant mall and Town and Country Center.

"If you made a scorecard and you were chalking up who's benefiting ... it's a pretty lopsided scorecard that I've come up with," said Caffery, who said the agreement most benefits property owner John Wessman.

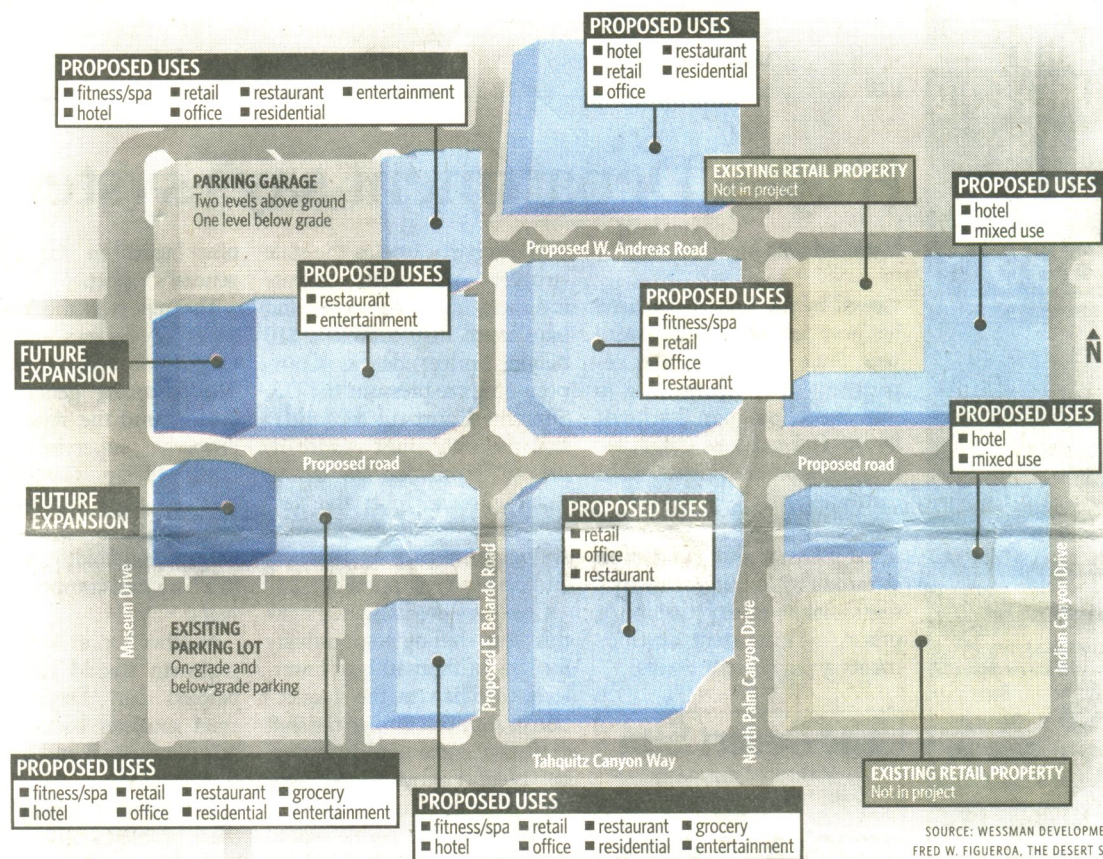
"I'm not pleased with what's before us, but I think it's the wrong direction (to reject it)," Donenfeld said. "I think we're setting ourselves back months."

"Of course, I'm disappointed with the Planning Commission's decision today, but as the citizens of Palm Springs know, I am committed to the city's downtown revitalization," said Mayor Steve Pougnet, who serves on the council's subcommittee which helped draft the agreement.

The council can still approve the de-

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A draft development agreement between Palm Springs and Wessman Development on the Museum Market Plaza, which includes the long-vacant Desert Fashion Plaza mall (above) and Town and Country Center, includes a design that divides the property into five blocks with two new through streets (below).



SOURCE: WESSMAN DEVELOPMENT
FRED W. FIGUEROA, THE DESERT SUN

VIDEO: A historical look at the troubled mall

Learn more about Desert Fashion Plaza, and watch a video presentation on the mall through the years at mydesert.com.

PLAZA: Preservationists upset

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velopment agreement, which officials say ensures that if new council members are elected later this year, plans for the Museum Market Plaza can remain the same and continue to move forward.

"What we, the community and city get is certainty," Wessman senior vice president Michael Braun said of the development agreement.

But some commissioners and residents are not so sure.

"There is no incentive to complete the project early," said resident Sheryl Hamlin, who also said that the proposal seems "one-sided."

"Essentially the way it's written ... it can go for 25 years with no work having been completed and we're on the hook for it."

According to the draft development agreement, Wessman has 10 years to complete the project if voters approve a general tax ballot measure this November.

While the measure has yet to be developed, city officials earlier this year talked about possibly needing anywhere from \$10 million to \$50 million.

Without the funds, Wessman has a maximum of 25 years to finish the project to give him time to secure private financing for the entire project.

"There is a great deal of skepticism here," said Ron Marshall, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

"We have a plan that has few elements the citizens asked for," said Barbara Marshall, wife of Ron Marshall and vice chair of the Palm Springs His-



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The long-vacant Desert Fashion Plaza in Palm Springs.

toric Site Preservation Board.

"Instead of pedestrian and slow traffic, we get streets and more streets of cars and more cars. And to add insult, the demolition of the Town and Country Center is back on the table."

The agreement, which included conceptual plans of what's to become of the Desert Fashion Plaza and Town and Country Center properties, shows a design that divides the property into five blocks with two new through streets.

A street Wessman deemed vital to the plan would run from Indian Canyon Drive straight to the Palm Springs Art Museum.

It requires the demolition of the Town and Country Center.

The idea is to create "connectivity" vital to the success of all future tenants of the property, which range from retail and restaurants to hotels and even residential units, Wess-

man said.

Commissioners disagree.

"Adding an extra street through the Town and Country Center, in my mind, is not the savior of the Desert Fashion Plaza project," said commissioner Hudson, who is also an advisory board member of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

Caffery believes the agreement "reads more like a contract to kill the Town and Country Center."

"We're going to replace it with world-class architecture here, if you read the summary. Well, we have world-class architecture sitting there," Caffery said of the center, which was designed by Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones in 1948.

Preservationist Gary Johns said the city's history of preserving historically important architecture within the city should have left the Town and Country Center out of the de-

molition plans.

"Saving architectural properties has been good for the city," Johns said.

"The Town and Country Center does not have to be a pawn in this developer's drama."

The Planning Commission is expected to approve a resolution on June 1 stating why they rejected the development agreement.

The City Council is slated to consider the commission's recommendation on June 15.

Despite the vote of no confidence, Wessman officials say they want to continue to work toward a project residents will be proud of.

"We remain totally committed working with the city to revitalize downtown," Braun said after the meeting.

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