

# Despite twists, Tahquitz Plaza stays alive, evades demolition



SKIP DESCANT/THE DESERT SUN

Tahquitz Plaza, a collection of four Palm Springs office buildings designed by Hugh Kaptur, and built between 1974 and 1977, have been granted an extended stay on demolition to Dec. 6.

## Preservationists insist the Palm Springs buildings deserve to be saved

**Skip Descant**  
The Desert Sun

Make no mistake, Tahquitz Plaza has been spared from demolition probably through the end of the year.

That doesn't mean it has not seen a close call or two in the last few months — whether that near miss occurred at its hearing with the Palm Springs His-

toric Site Preservation Board or through hastily applied for demolition permits.

The most recent episode played out last week when the Palm Springs Building Code Appeals Board determined that the city acted correctly when it issued a demolition permit in May for the collection of 1970s-era office buildings owned by Nexus Companies.

Preservationists in Palm Springs insist the buildings deserve to be saved and re-used.

"Naturally, I'm here to protect a piece of my work that I did some years ago," Hugh Kaptur, the designer and developer of Tahquitz Plaza, told the Building Code Appeals Board last

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# Tahquitz

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Wednesday, in his appeal to save the buildings from the wrecking ball. "Sometimes you may have baked a cake, or you painted a room, or something. And it really turned out extra special. And you're real proud of it."

"Well that's the way I feel about Tahquitz Plaza," Kaptur said of the complex that has been home to businesses like E.F. Hutton & Co., Anderson Travel and Best Bet and Krieger, the California law firm with offices in Los Angeles, San Diego, Washington D.C. and other locations.

However, questions about preservation should not cloud the appeals board's analysis, said city officials.

"Right now, all you're voting on, all you're voting on, is whether or not the building department had the authority (to) issue a demolition permit. That's it," Jim Zicaro, director of building and safety, told the board of appeals at its Thursday meeting.

Although the appeals board vote released the demo permit, it cannot be acted upon because the city's Historic Site Preservation Board placed a stay on demolition until Dec. 6.

That episode played out at the Sept. 8 meeting of the HSPB, where the historic preservation board nearly missed out on a chance to extend the stay on demolition because of a change to board's agenda.

Seldom is Gary Johns,

*"Naturally, I'm here to protect a piece of my work that I did some years ago."*

**HUGH KAPTUR**  
Designer and developer  
of Tahquitz Plaza

who chairs the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board, unfocused, flustered or for that matter — confused. But at that Sept. 8 meeting he seemed to be all of those.

"All right, well, may I have a moment?" Johns told his board, after about an hour discussing not only the historic architectural merits of Tahquitz Plaza, but also what steps can be taken to ensure Nexus does not move forward with demolition until the City Council weighs-in on whether the collection of four office buildings deserves Class I Historic Site status. The designation would protect Tahquitz Plaza, built between 1974 to 1977, from demolition.

Johns was holding a meeting agenda that included a recommendation to extend a stay on demolition another 60 days to Dec. 6. He had pointed out that agenda from the city's website Thursday, Sept. 3 — five days before the Tuesday meeting on Sept. 8. However, unbeknownst to Johns, the agenda had been modified since then and the stay on demolition recommendation was removed. Typically, that would block all

possible discussion and decision-making opportunities regarding the demolition stay, since items not listed on an agenda prior to a meeting cannot be discussed.

Without the extension, the site's current hold on demolition would expire on Oct. 6 — two days before the HSPB's next scheduled meeting on Oct. 8.

What makes this agenda change questionable among preservationists is that removing the extension for a stay on demolition is a change that could have greatly aided the property's owner, who has expressed a desire to tear Tahquitz Plaza down. In short, the second agenda created a window of demolition opportunity for Nexus, said Ron Marshall, who is active in the city's preservation movement, and an advocate of preserving the buildings.

Had the stay on demolition not been allowed to be approved, "legal action would have been the only recourse of the preservation groups," Marshall said.

Fagg didn't address directly the question of did any party — internal or external — intervene and ask that the extended stay on demolition be removed from the agenda.

"The extension of the stay of demolition is an authority given to the HSPB, not to the applicant or property owner," Fagg said.

In the end, Doug Holland, a private attorney contracted to serve as city attorney for Palm Springs, walked the board through the appropriate steps of taking up the stay

on demolition extension without running afoul of the Brown Act. The board also continued its discussion of Tahquitz Plaza until its October meeting when Kaptur can attend and add to the discussion.

"You can add it to your agenda because you can then make a finding that the need for that motion arose after the posting of the agenda," Holland told the board. "The need arose because we decided to continue this to a date that is past the date on which the extension would otherwise expire. Then that would generate the need to now consider whether or not you want to extend the extension."

Tahquitz Plaza — located on Tahquitz Canyon Way, across the street from the Regal Cinema — is the site of Aberdeen, a proposed mixed-use development that failed to get planning commission approval. Nexus has since pulled the project from consideration.

However, well before the HSPB hearing, Tahquitz Plaza and its related

Aberdeen have never been far from community discussion. Mayor Steve Pougnet worked as a consultant for a company called Union Abbey, which was formed by Richard Meany, who served as a senior official at Nexus.

Pougnet has since stepped down from his position at Union Abbey — where he was paid at least \$200,000, according to financial disclosure documents — after news reports of the business relationship began appearing in mid-April.

Back in December Pougnet joined the City Council to approve a land sale at another part of the city to Meany at a rate considered below market value. Pougnet later admitted the vote was a mistake.

Since then, the FBI, IRS and other agencies conducted a raid of Palm Springs City Hall as part of a public corruption investigation that also included collecting items from Pougnet.

On Sept. 15, the FBI

subpoenaed documents from Rosenow Spevack Group Inc., the Santa Ana consulting firm hired by the city of Palm Springs to estimate land values that later benefited Meany.

The Desert Sun also recently reported that Pougnet, Meany and Councilwoman Ginny Foat met for breakfast at Sherman's Deli in March to discuss the Aberdeen project. It's unclear whether Pougnet was at that meeting in his role as mayor or Meany's consultant. Foat said the two men didn't try to sway her vote on the since-shelved project.

Since then, Foat has maintained that the reason Aberdeen never came before the City Council was because Meany knew she was a no vote on the development.

However, it's not likely that Tahquitz Plaza will stay off of the City Council's radar forever. If the HSPB does ultimately approve the buildings as a Class I Historic Site, that status requires final approval by the City Council.