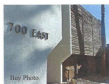


Tahquitz Plaza, a question for a new PS City Council



Ship Descant: The Desert Sun

5:17 p.m. PST November 2, 2013



(Photo: Lucas Esposito/The Desert Sun)

So much for the honeymoon.

New and returning members of the Palm Springs City Council – and a new mayor – will likely be faced with the future of Tahquitz Plaza at their first meeting on Dec. 2, city officials confirmed Monday.

The council will take up a recommendation by the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board that would elevate the collection of 1970s-era office buildings on Tahquitz Canyon Way to Class I Historic Site status. The designation would protect Tahquitz Plaza from demolition and require that any renovation be carefully scrutinized.

The buildings are owned by Nexus Development, which opposes the historic designation, and has plans to demolish them to make room for future development in the area.

The issue has catapulted a months-long community conversation about historic preservation in the face of real estate development. The topic became even more heated in April when revelations surfaced about a business relationship between Mayor Steve Pougnet and real estate developer Richard Meaney, known for his ties with Nexus. Beginning in 2013, Pougnet held a private consulting contract – paying at least \$100,000 a year – with a company known as Union Abbey. That company was formed by Meaney in 2004. It's never been clear what the company does. Pougnet has said he's since ended his business relationship with Meaney.

Meanwhile, earlier this year, both the Palm Springs Architectural Advisory Committee and the city's planning commission rejected a mixed-use development Nexus was proposing for the site. That project, known as Aberdeen, is no longer an active proposal.

Because of the mayor's past involvement with Nexus, he would likely recuse himself from the discussion and vote surrounding naming Tahquitz Plaza an historic site.

"Since Mayor Pougnet would have to recuse himself, it would take three votes out of four to designate the property," explained Peter Moruzzi, a member of the executive board of the Palm Springs Modern Committee, a preservation group. "A two to two vote would result in the nomination's defeat."

"I would prefer that a new council take up the issue where all five members would be eligible to vote, making three out of five a better opportunity for success," he continued. "In addition, I am hopeful that a new mayor and council will be even more supportive of designating Tahquitz Plaza than the current one."

Several months ago, amid the news reports about his consulting work with Meaney and the sale of city land to Meaney at what appeared to be a below-market-price, Pougnet announced he would not seek a third term.

"It's to our benefit that five, rather than four, City Council members hear this nomination," said Ron Marshall, a member of the board of directors of the [Palm Springs Preservation Foundation](http://pspreservationfoundation.org/index.html) (<http://pspreservationfoundation.org/index.html>). "There's been a growing anti-developer sentiment since the revelations about the mayor's 'consulting job.' Almost every one of the leading candidates has touted their strong support for historic preservation, so having a new council is to our benefit."

On Tuesday, voters in Palm Springs will choose a new mayor among a cast of eight candidates. One of those candidates, Councilwoman Ginny Foat – who has amassed more than \$250,000 in campaign cash – is largely regarded as one of the key front-runners. Foat has gone on record saying she would have voted against Aberdeen if the project had ever come before the council. What's still unclear is how she will decide the question of granting Tahquitz Plaza historic status.

Robert Moon, another front-runner for the mayor's seat said, "based on my extensive knowledge of this issue to date, I would anticipate that I would support the approval of a Class I Historic Site designation on this group of buildings."

Tahquitz Plaza was built between 1974 and 1977, and designed by local modernist architect Hugh Kaptur. The buildings hold no current protective status.

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