

Walk of Stars fate in limbo

No formal plan
for plaques to be
moved for project

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PALM SPRINGS — The marble star honoring Nellie C. Coffman, the mother of Palm Springs tourism, sits in the basement level of the Desert Fashion Plaza parking structure, covered in thick dust.

Sonny Bono's original star sits beside hers — not too far from a homeless encampment that calls the underground garage home.

"That's an outrage. They should be protected somewhere where they're not going to be stolen," said Jeri Vogel-sang, director/curator with the Palm Springs Historical Society.

The two markers were removed about eight years ago when a new facade was put on the plaza. Bono's star has since been replaced with a new one in front of his bronze statue at Mercado Plaza, but not Coffman's.

Their location is raising eyebrows, and with the demolition of the Desert Fashion Plaza sometime this spring to make way for Wessman Development's downtown project, some people want assurances that anything removed from the Palm Springs Walk of

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Stars

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Stars during construction won't be forgotten or stored for years on end like Coffman's.

The stars of Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra and Fred Waring are among the 50 memorials that will eventually be removed along Palm Canyon Drive to accommodate the project, said Bob Alexander, president of the Walk of Stars program.

An official plan for the stars has not yet been made, but City Manager David Ready said the plaques that are removed will be incorporated into the new streetscape.

Michael Braun, senior vice president with Wessman Development, said the stars will be addressed in their detailed landscape plans for the project, which will be submitted by the end of February.

"We're very sensitive to that issue and our intent and our goal is to ... preserve those stars," Ready said.

Once the stars are removed, Alexander said he doesn't think they'll be salvageable because of the concrete attached.

They'll have to be totally replaced at a cost of about \$100,000, or \$2,000 per star.

"This is a great tourist attraction with no cost to the tourist or taxpayer. I'm sure the city realizes that," he said. "They assured me they will come up with a viable answer, and I'm sure that they will."

Ready said either the city or Wessman Development or a combination of both would pay for the replacement and/or installation of the removed stars.

"I'd kind of like to see something in writing that says they will be replaced so (they) won't be lost completely," said Vogel-sang.

"Here these people have paid this money to have them. They should be protected."

The Palm Springs Walk of Stars is a not-for-profit corporation. Star honorees or their families typically pay for the stars.

Developer John Wessman is proposing to demolish most of the mall and replace it with three new blocks along Palm Canyon Drive that will include retail, restaurants, offices and a six-story Kimpton brand hotel.

Palm Springs voters last year approved a one percentage point sales tax increase to raise

\$200 million over 25 years, with \$43 million set aside to help Wessman revitalize the mall.

Palm Springs resident and preservationist Gary Johns was surprised to discover Coffman's star sitting in the basement, discarded and dingy.

"She" single-handedly put Palm Springs on the map with The Desert Inn," he said.

Owned by Coffman, the Desert Inn used to be where the Desert Fashion Plaza currently stands and was home to many Hollywood elite vacationers.

"She's credited really with being the mother of tourism. When she opened Desert Inn, she turned Palm Springs into a tourist town," Vogelsang said.

Alexander said he also had no idea Coffman's star was being stored in the basement of the parking garage.

When Coffman's star was first removed around 2004, he said he spoke with the family, who wanted to wait until the mall project was finished so it could be installed at its original location. He said the walk of star program would pay for a new star. "As far as I know, I'm sure we can get it awfully close by where it was originally," he said.

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