

Board unaware Pougnet worked for Meaney

Library OK'd plan to rent patio space

By Skip Descant

The Desert Sun

About six months before the long-closed Welwood Murray Memorial Library in downtown Palm Springs was due to open after an extensive renovation, the library's board of trustees was met with a startling request: Rent part of the library's back patio to a restaurant in exchange for patio renovations, maintenance and safety costs.

The restaurateur would be Richard Meaney, according to members of the Palm Springs Public Library Board of Trustees. Meaney had just opened the Hacienda Cantina & Beach Club, which now faces multiple lawsuits from contractors claiming non-payment.

Until late April, Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet was a paid consultant for Meaney. Pougnet says the business relationship goes back to March 2013 but library board members were unaware of it until recently.

The proposal that came before the library board in September involved Meaney opening a restaurant next door in the Plaza Las Flores building — a retail, commercial and office space housing businesses such as Ben & Jerry's, Oscar's Café &

Please see WELWOOD, 9A

Welwood

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Bar and Legends bar.

Plaza Las Flores Inc. is registered as an active business with the California Secretary of State and shares the same address as Wessman Development, the real estate development firm owned by John Wessman, who is developing the Museum Market Plaza in downtown Palm Springs. Meaney leases the property for his Hacienda Cantina from Wessman.

The concept to rent the patio space to a restaurant was first presented to city staff in City Hall.

"As the city owns the building, it would start with staff," City Manager David Ready said.

Two of the five board members rejected the idea on the grounds that sharing the library's outdoor space with restaurant seating and an outdoor bar was not in keeping with legal findings saying the building must be maintained as a library. Also, the activity associated with a bar and restaurant would prove to be too disruptive for the library, said Ron Willison, a trustee of the library's board of members.

In the end, the board voted 3-2 on Oct. 23, 2014, to OK the idea of renting the patio to a restaurant, though with a number of recommended conditions.

Since then, the restaurant idea has not moved forward.

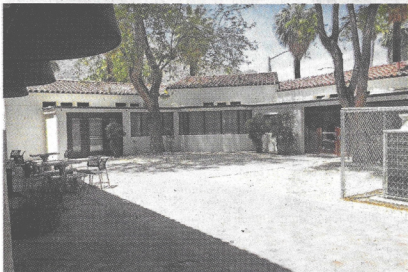
"The proposal never moved forward beyond the conceptual stage," Ready said.

Library officials say they were not aware of the business relationship between Meaney and Pougnet at the time of the restaurant discussions.

"David Ready presented it to the subcommittee but none of us were aware that the mayor was working for Mr. Meaney," recalled Willison, one of the more vocal opponents to the restaurant idea. "It was never discussed. The mayor was never at any subcommittee meeting that I can recall."

However, in an Oct. 21 letter addressed to Pougnet, members of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation openly wondered why "both the HSPB (Historic Site Preservation Board) members and the public remain largely in the dark about the details of this important issue."

The mayor never responded to the letter, said Barbara Marshall, a



A view of the Welwood Murray Memorial Library courtyard, which is adjacent to the Plaza Las Flores building in downtown Palm Springs.

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preservation foundation member.

Pougnet ended his business relationship with Meaney — a consulting job that involved educating Meaney on the city's economic development efforts — on April 24, after The Desert Sun revealed the arrangement that paid at least \$100,000 a year. In a letter dated May 6, Pougnet announced he wouldn't seek re-election in November.

Pougnet was employed by a firm known as Union Abbey, which lists Meaney as its principal. The Palm Springs-based company was created by Meaney in 2004 and had its business license suspended in 2009, state records show. Meaney also is a principal with Nexus Companies, the development firm behind multiple projects around the city including Aberdeen and the Hacienda.

The proposal to rent patio space to Meaney seemed like a rushed idea, board members said. And if the intent was to rent the patio to a restaurant, it should have taken the same "requests for proposals" process the city uses to obtain services, Willison said.

"It seemed out of place and pushed on us," Willison said of the proposal. "And the board voted in a rush to not 'upset or argue' with the city right before the reopening."

The library board members also questioned a proposed monthly rent of \$1,000 a month, saying it seemed low. When the library board voted to OK the patio lease idea, it included a provision that the rent be "based on commercial market value per

square foot," according to meeting minutes.

The library board also questioned city officials' claim that annual maintenance and security costs for the 1,500-square-foot patio space would mount to \$100,000 a year without a restaurant partnership, an amount Willison referred to as "wildly out of line."

Ready said the idea was always in the early "conceptual and informal" phase.

"There was no need to proceed beyond that, as it was apparent that the idea was not completely supported," Ready said. "Moreover, I don't think that particular restaurant is actually going to occur."

"Also, it was only considered, at a staff level to begin discussion, because that back area behind the Welwood has been a challenge to keep out loiterers, and maintain it as a secure area in the evening," he added.

At an Oct. 14 meeting of the Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board, board members asked Al Smoot, the city's project manager, if he had any update on the restaurant and patio proposal. He did not.

Today, the renovated Welwood's heating and air-conditioning equipment are installed in the patio.

"The board will be looking to propose another patio use," said David Gray, a member of the library board of trustees.

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