

TOWN & COUNTRY CENTER

Preservationists to developer Wessman: Sell shopping mall



JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

The Town & Country Center in downtown Palm Springs is seen on Wednesday. The center is a complex of seven buildings built as a shopping district between 1946 to 1955 and designed primarily by Los Angeles architects A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams.

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A new life for the long-decaying Town & Country Center in downtown Palm Springs could be more assured with a new owner, says the city's preservation community.

The complex of seven buildings built

as a shopping complex between 1946 to 1955, and designed primarily by Los Angeles architects A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams, is owned by Wessman Development, the same firm leading the redevelopment project in downtown Palm Springs. Wessman Development is also now mired in controversy following re-

cent charges of bribery, perjury and conflicts of interest against former Mayor Steve Pougnet and developers Richard Meaney and John Wessman.

"I would like to think that perhaps it is time for Wessman to relinquish owner-

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Wessman

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ship of this property, and let a qualified developer restore the Town & Country Center," said Susan Secoy-Jensen, an architect with extensive knowledge of the Town & Country and a member of the Palm Springs Architectural Advisory Committee.

The complex is part of the overall redevelopment plan for downtown. And about a year ago Wessman Development announced plans to restore the center and possibly locate a Marriott brand hotel on the site. Wessman even hired Leo Marmol of the Marmol-Radziner architecture firm, nationally known for its work in historic building rehabilitation. The news came as somewhat of a surprise to local residents and city officials. For years, Wessman wanted the complex demolished, much to the opposition of the city's vocal preservation community.

The change of heart was enough to raise eyebrows.

"Although Marmol has great preservation credentials, we were skeptical of that hiring as it seemed like mostly a public relations ploy," said Ron Marshall, a member of the board of directors for the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation.

In April 2016, the Palm Springs City Council granted the Town & Country Class I Historic Site status, local protections that guard against significant alteration or demolition. The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation planned to use the upcoming one-year anniversary of that designation as an opportunity to pressure the city to urge Wessman

to move forward with the building's redevelopment, or sell it.

"Like most others in town, we are waiting to see if there will be more (charges) and if the scandal puts Wessman Development in financial straits and forces them to shed assets," said Marshall, referring to the criminal complaint against Wessman who has since stepped down as head of the company. It is now run by his son on-law Michael Braun, who previously served as senior vice-president. (Wessman has denied the charges against him and maintains his innocence.) "Since the Town & Country Center has languished under Wessman's ownership for more than a decade, recent developments have made us cautiously optimistic.

"The best case scenario would be that the Town & Country Center will be sold to another developer, hopefully one that specializes in historic preservation," Marshall added.

Braun said the Town and Country "is not for sale."

"Our No. 1 priority always has been, and continues to be, to finish downtown," Braun said last week. That means completing the buildings currently under construction on Palm Canyon Drive, and the new Kimpton hotel, which Braun still stresses are on course to be finished by the end of the year.

"Then later this year Octavio Fernandez and I will evaluate all of our other projects and the next steps," said Braun. Fernandez is senior vice-president of Wessman Development.

Continuing the forward momentum on the company's downtown project could get sticky, since

former Mayor Pougnet cast at least five votes related to the project's approval while, according to court documents, he was receiving payments from Wessman. All told, the mayor received some \$375,000 over the course of about two years in transactions the Riverside County District Attorney's office has characterized as bribes.

The votes could be a violation of the state's conflict of interest laws, and it's not yet clear whether the charges will lead to the project's unraveling.

At last Thursday's meeting of the Palm Springs Planning Commission, Flinn Fagg, director of planning services, had few answers for the commission's questions related to how the downtown development would move forward.

"If you're asking questions about specific projects, I'll just tell you that at this point in time, we don't have clear direction, in terms of what we should be doing, from the District Attorney's Office," Fagg told commissioners. "But we will be under advisement from them. And we will take their direction accordingly."

"Again, we don't really have a clear path on some of the issues yet," he added.

Today, the Town & Country Center has only a few tenants and is mostly empty. It's enclosed by a security fence to prevent transients from trespassing. The shopping complex spans the area from Palm Canyon Drive to Indian Canyon Drive and sits across the street from what is expected to eventually become a lavish entertainment complex to be developed by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla

Indians. The plans call for a hotel with up to 350 rooms, spa, retail and meeting spaces, as well as an expansion of the tribe's Spa Casino. The real estate the Town & Country sits on is prime and has big potential, said Braun.

"The T&C is especially important in light of what the Agua Caliente announced several weeks ago," said Braun.

Mayor Robert Moon recently described the Town & Country Center as "an island of calm contrast between the downtown development and the Vision Agua Caliente project."

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