

What PS Council should do about Town and Country

Does the city council believe its work on the Town & Country Center is done? Some city councilmembers seem to think so. On February 27th, during a study session about the downtown redevelopment, city councilmembers defended the city's inaction on the Center. Responding to a citizen's frustration about the continuing deterioration of the Town & Country Center, a councilmember explained "...it's privately owned, so we [the council] have limited power on how we can force them [Wessman Development] to work on it, but we did preserve it."

In April of 2016, after a decade of advocacy and after being unanimously rejected by the city council seven years earlier, the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation brought forth the Class 1 Historic Site nomination of the Town & Country Center. Today, the Center's Class 1 designation is a milestone that city councilmembers are quick to take credit for.

But the council's work is far from done.

Here are a few things the city council can do: First and foremost, they should initiate eminent domain proceedings to take the Town & Country Center. It wasn't too long ago that the city council embarked on this same course of action for the entire downtown parcel (which then included the Center). Surely a property as historic as the Town & Country Center, which has languished for 15 years under the current owner, is a textbook example of a property that should be seized by the city.

Secondly, how about enforcing portions of the city's municipal code already on the books? Chapter 8.80 of the Palm Springs Municipal Code entitled "Maintenance of Long-term Boarded and Vacated Buildings" could be immediately enforced. Aggressive enforcement by the city would quickly generate significant fines for the owner. In short, the city could make the ownership of this largely vacated property a financial nuisance.

Thirdly, after years of being bullied by Wessman Devel-



Barbara Marshall

opment, the city leadership is now in the enviable position of being able to influence the company's actions. With the erratic John Wessman at the helm, Wessman Development often had public relations challenges: but the unfolding bribery scandal has eroded trust in the company like never before. If every city council member suggested to Wessman Development principal Michael Braun that he consider selling the Town & Country Center, he might actually listen. They might mention that selling the Center would not only create much public good will, but send the much-needed message that the "post-John" Wessman Development is an ethical and trustworthy company.

There is widespread public support for the rehabilitation of the Town & Country Center. Some of the declared candidates for city council have already stated their enthusiastic support for restoring the property. They recognize that the moribund Center is a cancer in our downtown, but it's a cancer that can be cured. Selling the Town & Country Center to a developer with a track record of successfully rehabilitating historic properties is not just a preservation victory, but a win for all of our citizens.

A year ago, with the Class 1 Historic Site designation of the Town & Country Center, the council very publicly stated that the Center is important. Now they need to move forward with more practical steps and show they really believe it's important.

Barbara Marshall is a board member of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation and a former vice-chair of the city's Historic Site Preservation Board. Email her at atomicbee57@yahoo.com.