

Wessman offers to save, restore Town & Country Center



Skin Descant, The Desert Sun

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(Photo: Wade Byars, The Desert Sun)

Wessman Development.

One of Palm Springs' most at-risk historic buildings seems to be getting a lifeline as its owner has changed course from wanting to tear it down to now wanting to restore it.

Wessman Development, which owns the Town & Country Center in downtown, plans to save [the building from demolition](https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2016/01/08/town-and-country-center-may-get-lifeline/78430142/) in a move that could have the dual effect of appeasing not only preservationists on the City Council, but numerous members of the larger community who have questioned the direction the redevelopment of downtown has taken.

"In the spirit of working with the community and the council, we are now exploring options with the goal to preserve most of the architecturally significant buildings," said Michael Braun, senior vice-president of

"It also has become apparent that the majority of the current council is in favor of an adaptive reuse of the Town Country versus demolition," he added in an email.

The move by Wessman development to save the Town & Country Center is being eyed cautiously by the city's preservation community.

"We remain skeptical that Wessman has the in-house expertise to do a first-rate rehabilitation of the T&CC," said Ron Marshall, a member of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation Board of Directors, via email. "We believe that the brightest future for the T&CC is to attract a developer that specializes in historic preservation projects."

The move, said Marshall, could be strategic on Wessman's part.

"I think the whole town knows there are now the necessary votes on the city council to designate the T&CC (a Class I Historic Site)," said Marshall, calling the news an "11th-hour conversion."

"Hence, this may be more about Wessman trying to retain control over Block K (Town & Country Center site) and to pre-empt any city-initiated eminent domain action," he added.

The decision to save the Town & Country Center is not all Wessman Development is proposing. For starters, it wants to give the block located behind the West Elm building, which is currently under construction, to the city to be used as a surface parking lot. Actually, Wessman wants sell the plot to the city for \$1.

The lot would be city-owned and accommodate about 75 cars.

"John Wessman and I responded to the comments about [additional parking needs](https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2016/01/11/downtown-parking-and-congestion-growing-worry/78432228/) in Downtown," said Braun, adding the new spaces will more than make up for the lost parallel parking spots along Palm Canyon Drive. As it stands, some 1,200 parking spaces, both above and below ground will be part of the development. It's enough to accommodate the parking requirements for the projects that have been approved. However, future development and the parking needs for special events have come under question by council members.

Much of the community concerns about the project have been about building height and massing, particularly since workers began building the 53-foot-tall retail, restaurant and residential building on Palm Canyon Drive next door to the Hyatt hotel. The ground floor will house a West Elm home store and a [Juice Served Here](https://www.juiceservedhere.com/), the stylish and upscale juice and coffee bar with numerous locations in the Los Angeles and Orange County metro area.

Even Wessman has admitted the building should have been sited back 10 or more feet, even though as it's currently constructed, a more than 30-foot-wide sidewalk separates the West Elm building from the street edge.

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To prevent making this mistake again, developers are proposing to eliminate 20 feet from the height of what's loosely called the "annex building," a 60-foot-tall, 90,000-square-foot building intended to house a mix of retail ([/story/news/2015/12/02/downtown-palm-springs-retail/76635130/](http://story/news/2015/12/02/downtown-palm-springs-retail/76635130/)) and residential uses on Palm Canyon Drive near the Tahquitz Canyon Way intersection. Reducing the height and increasing the building's setback on Palm Canyon Drive will shave some 56,000 square feet from the annex. Developers proposed to modify its use to retail throughout, and transfer its residential uses to the block just to the west, an area known as Block F.

Block F, which is the area just to the south of the city's new downtown park, is slated for a new 135-room AC by Marriott brand hotel. However, developers have repeatedly said they will postpone the development of this hotel for about five years if they get the green-light to build the Virgin Hotel on a nearby block. Wessman officials are now saying they would like the City Council to consider dedicating Block F to residential and retail uses, while also allowing the building height on that block to grow from 60 feet to 68 feet.

Mayor Robert Moon said he hasn't yet read the proposals put forward by Wessman Development.

"I am going to pour over it and all the agenda items this weekend," he said Friday morning. "Since I have not yet read it, it would be premature for me to comment on it."

One area Wessman is not deviating from is the need for the Virgin Hotel ([/story/money/business/tourism/2016/01/26/virgin-hotel-details-announces-details-palm-springs/79339432/](http://story/money/business/tourism/2016/01/26/virgin-hotel-details-announces-details-palm-springs/79339432/)) to be located near the center of the site overlooking the new public park and with a clear view of the Palm Springs Art Museum, a location some members of the City Council want reconsidered.

One concession Wessman has offered is a move to shorten the building from 75 feet to 69 feet.



A sketch showing the proposed Virgin Hotel in downtown Palm Springs. (Photo: Submitted photo: Wssman Development)

"If the City Council doesn't approve the Virgin Hotel, that's OK. I think it would be very sad," Braun lamented in a recent meeting with the editorial board of The Desert Sun.

"The project will still be successful," he added. "But not as successful as this project could be, and the town would not have the benefits of the spillover effect, bringing this brand right into the heart of our downtown."

The Town & Country Center shopping complex and courtyard was designed by Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones in 1948.

Wessman argued in the past that the mixed-use building is a poor example of mid-century architecture and is problematic to lease due to its awkward layout, low ceilings and other deficiencies. The building also stands in the way of a proposed new street for the area that would form an east-west axis connecting the Palm Springs Art Museum with other areas like the Palm Springs Convention Center.

In June 2009, the Palm Springs City Council unanimously rejected a recommendation by the city's Historic Site Preservation Board to name the Town & Country Center as a Class I Historic Site.

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These and other issues will be heard at the next City Council meeting at 6 p.m. Wednesday at City Hall.

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