

Opinion

VALLEY VOICE

Wessman's Baristo Lofts project flawed

When a city sees new development as a quick-fix to its economic woes, savvy developers smell the opportunity for a quick payday.

Throw in a public frustrated by inaction (Desert Fashion Plaza) and you have all the ingredients required for a "perfect storm" of civic desperation. Soon we will see just how anxious the Palm Springs leadership is for any development when the City Council hears developer John Wessman's Baristo Lofts project.



ron marshall

The project, described by one observer as "a real stinker," was approved 4-1 by the city's Planning Commission despite significant public outcry. The project originally included a rather offensive proposal to slap an outdoor seating area onto the historic Santa Fe bank building at 300 S. Palm Canyon Drive.

After many months of interaction with the city (the project was so flawed it was seen by the Architectural Advisory Committee six times), Wessman grudgingly withdrew the outdoor seating component, as it could not be disguised as anything less than a direct assault on the historic building. He then cynically used the ploy to convince the gullible planning commissioners that some sort of "balance" had been struck.

But where is the proper balance? The primary element of the project (and the real money-maker for Wessman) is a four-story condominium placed on a tiny postage stamp-sized piece of land. The proposed condo, which can only be described as overbuilt, is jammed against the one-story Santa Fe bank building and looms over the elegant modernist icon like a hulking monster. At street level, the proposed physical separation between the two buildings is a mere 16 feet, and at one point the roof overhangs are only 4 feet apart.

While attending the Planning Commission meeting that addressed the project, it became obvious that some of the commissioners didn't fully grasp the extent of the waivers being requested for the project (in city planner-speak: "deviations"). I and others in the audience were confused.

The next day, I made an appointment with a Palm Springs city planner to better understand the extent of these deviations. As the city planner professionally, and patiently, described to me the "underlying development standards for the high-rise ordinance," I came to the stunning realization that the required setbacks for the proposed condominium actually overlapped in opposing directions, from east to west and north to south — effectively prohibiting the existence of the building in three-dimensional space.

Why would anyone propose such a large building on such a small lot? If Wessman gets approval from the council, that approval makes the project's tiny piece of land (now a modest parking lot) instantly valuable to a potential new buyer.

In the city's analysis of Baristo Lofts, there is a curious argument that the project has some "public benefit." Incredibly, that benefit is that Wessman will not despoil the Santa Fe bank building.

Finally, Wessman has not made the Baristo Lofts project as "green" a development as he could. This is unfortunate, as the city is in the midst of a highly publicized sustainability initiative. Just how bad does a proposed development have to be before the Palm Springs City Council balks? We'll see shortly.

Ron Marshall is the president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. He can be reached at info@pspreservationfoundation.org