

# **Palm Springs Town and Country Center may get lifeline**

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**Most Palm Springs councilmembers seem willing to preserve the downtown shopping center - at least temporarily.**



The fight over a longstanding shopping center in downtown Palm Springs appears to be entering a new chapter – one that preservationists see as a sign the complex will stay.

A draft update to the city’s downtown redevelopment plan includes new protections for the Town and Country Center across the street from Wessman Development’s massive mix of hotels, housing and retail under construction. The Wessman firm wants to knock down the center, which it owns, to make way for a road connecting the Palm Springs Art Museum and the Convention Center.

But at a meeting to discuss the plan Wednesday, most of the five-member City Council seemed willing to protect the center -- at least temporarily.

“I considered last night a breakthrough moment for the Town and Country Center,” said Ron Marshall, a board member and former president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. “The prospects have really improved dramatically for the Town and Country in the last year.”

Wessman Development senior vice president Michael Braun said the company is prioritizing the first phases of its 20-acre project and will focus on the Town and Country Center at a later date.

"The Downtown Urban Guidelines issued by the City of Palm Springs in 2006 and the Specific Plan adopted in 2009 highlighted the importance of an East West Connection from Downtown to the Convention Center," Braun wrote in an email. "Downtown Tenants and Hotel Operators have expressed similar views."

Paul R. Williams and A. Quincy Jones designed the center in the late 1940s. It currently houses the Destination PSP gift shop, but many of its storefronts are empty.

Preservationists tout the Town and Country Center’s pedestrian courtyard and long lifespan as reasons to protect it from demolition. But John Wessman, who heads Wessman Development, argues it has an awkward layout and low ceilings that make it unattractive to potential tenants.

The city swatted down a proposed historic designation for the center in 2009 that would have made it virtually impossible to demolish. Officials laid out a design document for the downtown redevelopment -- including the plan to knock the center down for a new road -- that same year.

But a draft update to the plan working through the city approval process is much kinder to the Town and Country Center. It requires the block it sits on to be developed last among the downtown area -- which will likely be years from now. And it requires an independent study on whether it's feasible to preserve any or all of the center before knocking it down.

The City Council may accept or further amend the plan next week. At a lengthy meeting Wednesday night, Councilman Chris Mills said the city has talked for years about the importance of an east-west connection in the area.

"And there was a lot of study over the years of what lane makes the most sense, the museum to the convention center. ... There were several studies, there were reviews, there was this and that. And at the time, the decision was made to put it through K," Mills said, referencing the block housing the center.

Councilwoman Ginny Foat argued the two-way Andreas Road already connects the museum and convention center. Her colleague J.R. Roberts agreed.

"Why have alternatives that don't exist when we have a clear and functional path now?" Roberts said.

Marshall, from the preservation foundation, wants the city to go further. He noted the state's historical resources commission nominated the center for national historic designation last year. And he plans to send the city a new historic designation nomination for the center this month.

"This is the moment. Let's not do it with half measures," Marshall said. "Let's rip the Band-Aid off right now."

Desert Sun reporter Skip Descant contributed to this story.

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