

# Rebirth plans for historic church, Orchid Tree Inn in Palm Springs extended. Security concerns addressed

Sherry Barkas | Palm Springs Desert Sun | December 15, 2018



An architect's sketch of the Orchid Tree Inn and Spa, proposed in the historic Tennis Club neighborhood in Palm Springs *Courtesy of Richard Weintraub*

A developer with plans to turn a burned historic church into a luxury boutique hotel in Palm Springs has received a one-year extension from the city, but he must address security issues around the vacant buildings soon.

“This site looks terrible,” Palm Springs Mayor Pro Tem J.R. Roberts said Wednesday in explaining why the extension for the historic Community Church of Palm Springs and the adjoining Orchid Tree Resort and Spa, granted by the Planning Commission in November, was brought to the City Council for review.

“We want to get a clearer picture on where (developer Richard) Weintraub is headed,” Roberts said.

Ultimately, the council unanimously upheld the one-year extension, with some conditions, most of which were required by the Planning Commission.

“I think we are down to the last extension,” Councilwoman Lisa Middleton said.

“I am not going to encourage Mr. Weintraub to think we can come back at the end of 2019 and ask for 2020,” she said.

In 2016, developer Weintraub received approval from the city’s Planning Commission to build a luxury boutique hotel at the site of the long-vacant church at 222 S. Cahuilla Road and the Orchid Tree.

Situated in the city’s historic Tennis Club neighborhood, the church was damaged by fire in September 2013, while key buildings at the Orchid Tree Inn property were destroyed in two separate fires in 2007.

The project has since experienced a number of delays, not all within Weintraub’s control, officials said.

Of immediate concern is making sure the buildings are structurally secure and not accessible to trespassers.

Area neighbors want a fence around the property that hides the blight as much as possible, but the police chief said the site needs to be visible to officers, so officers can easily see if anyone is on the property who shouldn’t be.

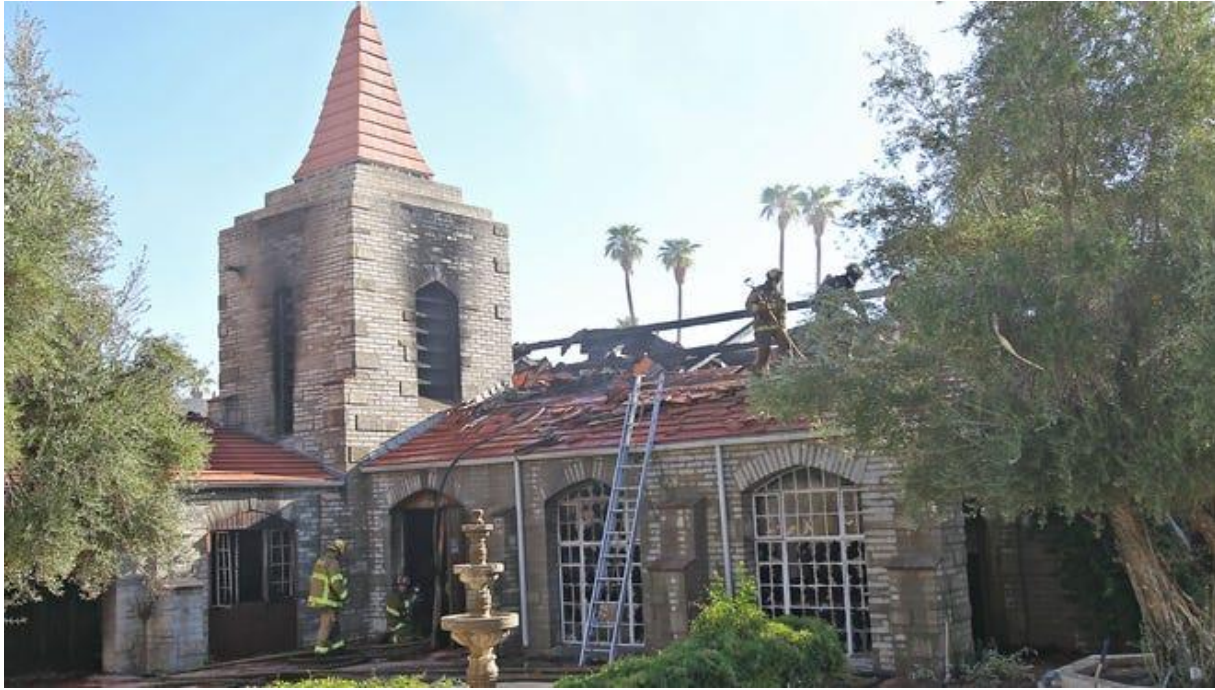
“Ideally, it would help us out to be exposed,” Police Chief Bryan Reyes said.

Weintraub agreed to meet with Reyes and his staff at the property, which is a magnet for the homeless, to discuss installing real-time security cameras.

“Real-time feeds are live reports of what is going on ... and we can break officers from other low-level crimes” to respond and immediately take care of the problem, Reyes said.

Weintraub said he would welcome cameras on the property.

“I have no problem working with the police department ... to help secure the property and make it better,” he said.



Firefighters put out the remains of a fire at the historic Community Church in Palm Springs, Wednesday, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013 *Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun*

The hotel is being billed as a six-star resort which to be operated by Auberge. The yearlong extension is needed for a variety of reasons, including remedying the need for more parking as Auberge has required.

“This needs to be resolved,” Mayor Robert Moon said.

Over the past 18 months, there have been discussions of off-site parking in a city garage.

Parking spaces cost about \$26,000 each to build, Moon said.

“If we give 100 spaces or 200 spaces, that can be a value of anywhere from \$2.6 million to \$5.2 million,” he said.

Maintenance on 1,000 public parking places costs the city about \$150,000 per year, as well, Moon said.

“We need to make sure that somehow we have a program to lease (spaces) or do something to get fair market value because this is public property,” Moon said.

Weintraub said he has hired a parking consultant to help outline his options, including the possibility of leasing private properties.

In November, Weintraub sought a two-year extension on the project but was granted just one year by the Planning Commission.

With concerns for illegal trespassing and further deterioration of the historic structures, the commission outlined some conditions, which the council upheld:

- That within 90 days, independent engineering report be prepared for the Community Church structure to determine its current stability and recommendations, if any, on building shoring/support. A security plan also must be implemented that is approved by city agencies, including fire, police and planning. Fencing and lighting must be installed and the city engineer must prepare a report if there are any sidewalk repairs needed.
- Within six months, Weintraub must complete any recommended building shoring/support at the Community Church structure.
- A status report on completion of the requirements must be provided to the Planning Commission within six months.

The City Council also required that “No Trespassing” signs be posted on the site. Once cameras are installed, “Video Surveillance” signage should also be added.

The church is owned by Cahuilla Church LLC while the other parcels are owned by New Church II LLC – both Nevada-based firms – and managed by Weintraub and Weintraub Descendants Trust of 2009.

Weintraub said he, too, is eager to get the development moving.

“We want to do a first-class project as soon as possible,” Weintraub said. “It doesn’t benefit myself or anyone else not to have this project started.”