

Desert Sun

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Rebuilding downtown

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Developer's plan calls for razing desolate Desert Fashion Plaza

Some see proposal as a positive step toward revitalization

By Stefanie Frith

The Desert Sun

The desolate Desert Fashion Plaza could be transformed into a lifestyle center with 1,000 residential units and retail space complete with a grocery store, book store and upscale dining, developer John Wessman said Monday.

The massive building has eaten up prime downtown space for several years. Some charge the extended vacancy has driven tourists away and has hindered a revitalization of Palm Canyon Drive.

And now, something could happen.

At least that's what Paul Lubin, co-owner of The Desert Bear hotel, said Monday when he learned conceptual plans submitted early that day called for demolishing all 358,000 square feet of the Fashion Plaza to make way for retail and residential units.

"I have been coming here for 25 years, and I have watched the demise," said Lubin, who was shopping downtown Monday afternoon. "It used to be a great mall. So I am all for whatever they want to do because times change and things need to evolve."

Wessman said he has the financial backing to complete the project - with an estimated price tag of \$500 million to \$750 million - and break ground by fall 2007.

Wessman Development Co., headed by Wessman, who has owned the Desert Fashion Plaza since 2001, submitted plans to Palm Springs City Hall on Monday morning, as reported first on thedesertsun.com.

Wessman envisions up to six stories with 940 to 1,100 residential units on top of 250,000 square feet of retail space.

The plan is different from what he submitted last year, when eight stories and 500 condos were proposed. He then had to go back and revamp the plans when the Downtown Urban Guidelines were approved by the City Council over the summer. Those plans allow only 60 feet on Palm Canyon Drive. Currently, the Hyatt hotel is 65 feet.

"We want this to be the best product we can produce," Wessman said Monday morning after a meeting with about 20 downtown stakeholders.

Jose Mezquita, a sales associate with Tarbell Realtors in the Fashion Plaza, said he was disappointed to see Palm Springs starting to change, though.

"We don't need a six-story building," Mezquita said after looking at the plans. "We need to fill up what we have. If this turns into a city, we will have no more small-town feel."

Working document

Plans submitted by Wessman Development are only conceptual, not formal, meaning they will be reviewed at the staff level and then returned to Wessman for possible revisions, said Planning Director Craig Ewing. Plans will then go to the Architectural Advisory Committee, Planning Commission and City Council for approval.

So far, plans include:

A mixed-use development with shops, bookstores, entertainment, restaurants, pharmacy and a grocery store on the bottom and residential units on top.

The existing shopping center would be torn down, along with the Town & Country Center across the street where Zeldaz Dance Club is located. Zeldaz, opened in 1977, is the longest-running club in Palm Springs.

A new driving and pedestrian street, tentatively named Museum Boulevard, would go through the middle to connect with the Palm Springs Art Museum and Convention Center and proposed new hotels like the Hard Rock and Westin. Palm trees might line the way, as well as galleries near the museum. Art work, such as sculptures, could also line the street.

Four or five separate buildings up to six stories tall that will allow for view corridors to see the mountains and lots of open space for gathering.

2,000 parking spaces.

Residential units costing between \$300,000 and \$2.5 million for the penthouse suites. Concierge amenities would be available.

About 250,000 square feet of retail - about as big as the Target and Trader Joe's shopping center in Cathedral City.

Guests at Wessman's meeting Monday seemed impressed with the conceptual plans. Earl Greenburg, a longtime resident and chairman of the Palm Springs International Film Festival, was excited the plans would open up access to the Palm Springs Art Museum.

"In essence, this project saves the museum," said Greenburg, who suggested the new road be called Museum Drive and the development be named Museum Village.

Instead, the development is tentatively being called the Museum Market Plaza, said Wessman Development Vice President Michael Braun.

He said the time is right to develop the Fashion Plaza, built in the 1960s after the Desert Inn was torn down. Cathedral City is actively trying to build up its downtown, and the east valley is growing quickly. Palm Springs needs to act now to get the kind of retailers it wants, he said.

Councilman Chris Mills, who was on the Fashion Plaza subcommittee with Councilman Steve Pougnet, said to keep in mind the plans are only conceptual. But as long as they stay within the guidelines for downtown, there is "no reason why it can't move through the city."

And if that means tearing down the Town & Country Center - designed in 1946 by A. Quincy Jones and Paul R. Williams - to make way for a new road, then so be it, said Braun. Although the building is listed on the Palm Springs Historic Site Survey, it is not a historical building, he said.

Preserving history?

The Town & Country Center won't go without a fight though, said Palm Springs Modern Committee President Peter Moruzzi. The preservation group plans to put pressure on the City Council to educate council members about the "historically significant" center.

"Though it is neglected, it is very original," said Moruzzi. "It's important to modernism in the desert."

Laura Walsh, who owns the Cockey Cactus, a southwest shop, said she supports the plans to do something with the Fashion Plaza and Town & Country. She called the plans "fantastic" and said the Town & Country Center is an eyesore.

"This is going to bring Palm Springs back to what we remember," she said after the meeting at Wessman's office.

Later, in downtown, Maybelline Marianni, who works at Washington Mutual on Palm Canyon Drive, said she was excited to see a bit of "city feel" come to Palm Springs.

"The big stores can mix with the little stores," said Marianni, who moved to Palm Springs from Puerto Rico about two years ago. "It's going to bring people down here. I think it sounds great."

Photo: Michelle Yee, The Desert Sun

The site of the Desert Fashion Plaza on Palm Canyon Drive in Palm Springs Monday.

Glances: WHAT THEY SAID

"In essence, this project saves (the Palm Springs Art) museum."

Earl Greenburg

Palm Springs International Film Festival chairman

"I am not going to sit back, we are going to fight for this (project)."

Joy Meredith

Main Street president and owner of Crystal Fantasy downtown

"It's going to bring people down here. I think it sounds great."

Maybelline Marianni

Palm Springs resident who was shopping downtown Monday

"I have watched the demise (of the Desert Fashion Plaza). It used to be a great mall. So I am all for whatever they want to do."

Paul Lubin

Owner of The Desert Bear hotel in Palm Springs who was shopping downtown Monday

"I think there's too much development. I like it the way it is. They shouldn't change the faÇade."

Russ Sellers

Tourist from Minnesota who stays in Palm Springs every year

"I think building in the (middle of downtown) takes away from the resort feel, and if they do it to Palm Springs then I'll leave."

Jose Mezquita

Sales associate with Tarbell Realtors at the Desert Fashion Plaza

What it means to . . .

Redeveloping the Desert Fashion Plaza means something to several different groups

To the city and its residents: More than 900 residential units and at least 250,000 square feet of retail space means more tax revenue for a city that has struggled with budget woes. As of Monday evening, it wasn't clear how much tax revenue the project could generate/

To merchants: Bringing in at least 1,000 people to live in downtown means their shops and restaurants will have a built-in clientele. Not having a giant vacant building in the center of downtown will help aesthetics and the perception that there are things to do.

To preservationists: Losing the Town & Country Center. Designed in 1946, the center is a handsome example of mid-century modern architecture by notable architects.

To tourists: They have a better chance of finding a vibrant downtown, where they can sit outside, look at the mountains, sip coffee and have nice places to shop.

What's next

The Fashion Plaza plans - tentatively called the Museum Market Plaza - were submitted Monday at Palm Springs City Hall.

They are preliminary plans, which mean they do not show any architectural styles. This allows the plans to be shown and talked about with city staff.

A meeting will take place in about two weeks with staff and Wessman Development Co. Comments received can then be implemented and more formal plans can be submitted later.

John Wessman said Monday that if all goes well, he could break ground in fall 2007.

Did you know?

Plans for the Fashion Plaza site include buildings that are a combination of retail and residential units up to six stories tall, or 60 feet.

In downtown, the tallest building is the Hyatt Hotel at 65 feet. The tallest structure is the El Mirador Tower at 108 feet.

Currently, under the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines approved by the City Council last year, 60-foot buildings are allowed at three locations downtown: Palm Canyon Drive and Alejo Road, Palm Canyon Drive and Ramon Road, and at the Desert Fashion Plaza. Thirty-five feet is allowed on the west side of Palm Canyon Drive; 45 feet is allowed on the east side.