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### Bellevue Biltmore's days are numbered

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By BRIAN GOFF

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BELLEAIR –Belleair commissioners voted 5-0 to grant a certificate of appropriateness to the owners of the Bellevue Biltmore Hotel. That means owner-developer Mike Cheezem of JMC Communities can now demolish the hotel and get on with building his townhouse/condominium development on the land.

The decision was made at a special commission meeting Dec. 9.

Earlier in the day, before a standing room only crowd, the town's Historic Preservation Committee voted on the issue and the outcome was the same.

It was actually the second time Cheezem got a COA from the Board. Back in September, he was granted the special certificate when his plans called for the mixture of townhouses, condo buildings and a new 33-room hotel, which was to be fashioned after the Biltmore, and be the centerpiece of the development.

Shortly after he got the certificate, Cheezem changed the plan. Instead of building a new hotel, he proposes saving part of the West Wing of the hotel and moving it to the site of the proposed new hotel. The change caused the need for the new meetings.

The change also caused hours of discussion and debate.

At the meeting of the Historic Preservation Board Cynthia Tarapani of Florida Design Consultants outlined the new plan for the developer. She said the change to move part of the hotel was made to enhance the historic nature of the development.

"All other features of the development do not change," she said. "The hotel has no negative impact on the site plan."

Tarapani said that the west wing was the first part of the hotel built in 1897. She said the idea to make the change came about when Cheezem met preservation architect Tamara Peacock who showed him how the west wing could be saved. Although it is the oldest part of the hotel, it is the least damaged, she said.

"Mr. Cheezem continued to study and came across the architect who said it could be moved," said Tarapani. "It is not going to be easy and it is not going to be cheap. There is a huge cost attached to moving a building, any building."



Photo by BRIAN GOFF

Preservation architect Tamara Peacock explains how a portion of the Bellevue Biltmore hotel can be saved.

Later, at the Commission meeting, she pointed out that restoring the hotel in its entirety would be virtually impossible.

"The building isn't frozen in time," she said. "There have been a variety of alternations over time. It would take great difficulty and expense to restore the building and it will cost over \$200 million. It is no longer a grand hotel."

Peacock explained the process by which the five-story structure would be moved the 723 feet to its new location.

"It is in tough shape. First of all it will have to be braced," she said. "I've moved seven other buildings so I know what is involved. We put steel underneath so the structure will be sitting on a steel frame. It will be slid over on that."

"The move is all about weight. The people who do this talk about tons so before it is moved the building will have to be gotten ready," she said. "Inside the old plaster will be taken out, all to lighten it. The porch will be detached and re-attached after the move."

Back at the early meeting, the chairman of the Historic Preservation Board was clearly pleased when he heard of the new plan.

"I think it is fantastic that you are trying to save a portion of the hotel," said David Hutcheson. "It is absolutely phenomenal that Cheezem wants to save a portion of the hotel."

Preservationist Rae Claire Johnson was not happy with what she was hearing.

"I'm not in favor of saving a portion of the hotel," she said. "How can a 33-room hotel be successful? When it is not successful who us going to run it when it fails? It will be a huge tax burden for us. If they can save the West wing they can save the whole building."

Among those on the other side of the argument was resident Tom Kurey.

"The town of Belleair has endured this significant burden long enough," he said. "I'm thrilled that a portion will be saved and if JMC doesn't do it, it won't be done."

After much more discussion, it came down to the board members final comments before the vote.

"I've lived here for 25 years and I've never met anybody who wants to tear down the hotel," said Kathy Gaston. "Whoever on this board votes to approve the certificate will do so with a heavy heart."

"Nobody is a bad person here," said Don White. "We have to do what is right for the town. If part of the hotel can be saved we have to grab onto that real hard."

"I'm excited that they are going to save part of the hotel so I can share it with my kids," said Alex Chamberlain.

"I would love to see somebody buy it and restore it, but for ten years that hasn't happened. There should be some finality to this, we should move forward," Hutcheson said.

"I truly hate to see the hotel torn down but we have to face reality," said Nancy Reardon. "We have put a lot of due diligence into this."

"As a previous naysayer I think saving part of the hotel is the best course," said Peter Marich, who voted against the certificate back in September.

The final voice from board members came from Cliff Zurcan.

"This is the right thing to do at this point," he said. "We just have to say what is best for the citizens of this town."

Then the vote was taken and the unanimous result was passed along to the town commissioners who met as quickly as they could change the nameplates on front of the desks.

First up was attorney Ed Armstrong who represented the current owners, the Ades brothers of Miami and the new owner, Cheezem and JMC Communities.

As he did at previous meetings, he called witnesses to support their application for the special certificate.

Engineer Mike McCarthy told how the rain had damaged much of the building with 50 percent of it not salvageable.

Contractor Ed Parker testified that it would cost roughly \$200 million to restore the hotel.

Kathy Conroy of the Miami firm HVS, hotel appraisers and evaluators, testified that the cost of refurbishing the hotel would make it impossible to attract investors.

"The cost is the problem here," she said. "We would value the hotel, once it is restored, to be worth about \$48 million." She said. "Who is going to invest \$200 million on a property that will end up being worth \$48 million? The conclusion is pretty obvious. There is no feasibility in renovating this hotel."

After even more comment and debate from members of the audience, the commissioners then had their say.

"Everybody knows my unambiguous desire to save the hotel," said Stephen Fowler. "But now it is time to turn to Cheezem and move on."

"Money talks and B.S. walks," said Mayor Gary Katica. "And I say to all the people who came from outside to tell us how to do things, we know how to run our town."

"I have always wanted to save the hotel," said Michael Wilkinson. "Nothing has worked. The plan before us is a good one and I'm ready to pass it."

"We've done everything possible. It is time to move on. We can't live in fantasy," said Tom Shelly.

"We're here to do what is best for the town, based on facts and not emotion," said Kevin Piccarreto.  
"I'm going to sleep really well tonight."

Then they too voted unanimously to grant Cheezem the certificate of appropriateness.

After the meeting Cheezem said he was excited about saving part of the hotel.

"Part of history lives on," he said.

Cheezem said he expects to close the deal to buy the property from the Ades brothers by late January and by March he expected the salvage work to be done with the demolition to follow after that.

"It will all take several months," he said. "Construction should begin something in late summer."

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