

11th Hour Plea Fails To Save Historic Block

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By Maresa Archer

A personal plea from Bowen family members failed to get a

stay of demolition for the historic tin buildings across from the Huntington Beach Civic Center.

The Planning Commission voted 6-1 Tuesday night to allow Pacific Coast Homes to raze the original home of the S.R. Bowen Co. to build six houses.

Geri Ortega cast the dissenting vote, claiming that the project violated the California Environmental Quality Act by illegally splitting the project from a larger one adjacent to the tin buildings.

The controversy over the Lake Street buildings started last fall when Pacific Coast Homes, a subsidiary of the Huntington Beach Co., requested a demolition permit to destroy the tin structures in order to build 86 houses on the property across from the Civic Center bordered by Lake Street and Yorktown Avenue.

At that time, the city's planning department decided the tin buildings may have some historic value and so divided the project into two separate entities, thus allowing for an environmental impact report to be done on both projects. One plan
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Bowen...

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was for 80 houses, another for a six-unit project that included destruction of the tin structures.

But by dividing the project, it appeared to some that the planning department was trying to circumvent the intent of CEQA by making the project an all or nothing choice.

"It's the difference between allowing 80 homes or 86. By looking at the whole project and denying the developer six homes to save three historic buildings, that's not a hardship.

"But looking at a smaller project that has only six homes and the choice is the developer gets

six homes or nothing, that's a hardship and that's what was done," said community activist Doug Langevin.

"That was done to ensure the buildings would be fairly evaluated. We did not split the project, we followed CEQA exactly. If there were questions about the project, they should have been raised when the tract maps were filed last fall," countered Mike Adams, director of Community Development.

Beverly Bowen Moeller, granddaughter of Sam R. Bowen, said she only heard about the threat of demolition a month ago.

Moeller flew in from her home in Texas to plead with commissioners to delay demolition

for two years. During that time, she said she would work to garner funding to transform the structures into an oil museum.

That was the extent of Moeller's plan, and she lost the battle when commissioners started asking for details on compensating the property owner.

Moeller's grandfather, who

was a prominent Huntington Beach businessman, built the tin structures in 1921 as manufacturing plants for oil well tools.

Bowen also patented a "fishing tool" that was used to retrieve broken drill bits from oil wells. The tool is still used today.

Bowen became a leader in city politics, serving as mayor in 1928.