

City officials hoping for hotel property's sale to developer

By Will Bigham, Staff Writer
Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

Article Launched: 06/26/2007 12:24:35 AM PDT

CLAREMONT - City officials have been working quietly for more than a year on behalf of the developer of the DoubleTree Hotel to encourage the land's current owners to sell it to Harry Wu, the developer and lease holder of the hotel.

The city's work assisting Wu began after talks between Wu and the owners about a possible sale broke down, the owners said.

The city sent a letter to the owners threatening the use of eminent domain a year ago and have since had several meetings with the owners.

The City Council is meeting in closed session tonight to discuss the issue.

The city is hoping the owners sell because Wu's lease to operate the hotel expires in about 14 years. Wu completed a \$10 million overhaul of the hotel last year, and he wants to ensure that the expense was not wasted, city officials said.

"If (Wu) can't get a longer lease, what would happen is the owner will stop investing money in the hotel and will basically let the existing facility ... deteriorate," Mayor Peter Yao said.

"The city's goal is to have a stable hotel over the long term, and a good quality hotel," said Brian Desatnik, the city's housing and redevelopment manager.

Rolland Towne, co-owner of the property, said he believes that before Wu purchased the hotel in 2005, Wu was given assurances by the city that a deal would be worked out for him to gain ownership of the land, with the city invoking its powers of eminent domain if necessary.

"(Wu) knew what was going to happen before he went to us," Towne said. "He wouldn't have bought the hotel" unless he had assurances from the city.

When the owners rejected the terms of a potential sale during early talks with Wu, the city became involved soon after.

In a letter to the property owners dated June 12, 2006, City Manager Jeff Parker outlined the city's position that the hotel was "blighted" - which a property must be by law for a city to use its eminent domain powers.

However, a renovation of the hotel by Wu had recently been completed, and city officials praised the condition of the hotel during a ribbon-cutting ceremony only two weeks prior to sending the letter.

"This property, in the center of Claremont, has been turned into one of the most beautiful places in the city," Yao said during the event.

The letter goes on to state that the city "will retain complete, sole and absolute discretion as to whether or not it will exercise its power of eminent domain."

"Harry Wu went to them and requested that they do eminent domain so he could get it," said Barbara Boquet, Towne's sister and the other co-owner. "It was pretty scary. We had to get an attorney."

The Towne family has owned the land where the DoubleTree sits for more than 100 years. Nearby Towne Avenue is named after the family.

Towne said that when the hotel lease expires in 2021, the family plans to make a decision about what to do with the land. The family had no intention of selling the land before Wu and the city forced the issue, Towne said.

The decision to send a letter threatening eminent domain was made at the staff level. The City Council never met to discuss the issue, Yao said.

Wu and Parker did not return calls seeking comment.

Council members Ellen Taylor and Corey Calaycay declined to comment on the issue.

Wu is also the owner of the adjacent Old School House, which he is in the midst of redeveloping.

Staff writer Will Bigham can be reached by e-mail at will.bigham@dailybulletin.com, or by phone at (909) 483-8553.

Close Window

Send To Printer