

Remnants of Matilija Hot Springs resort being leveled

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The remnants of the historic Matilija Hot Springs resort near Ojai are set to be demolished in the next few weeks amid lingering questions over whether anything could be saved after the Thomas Fire left much of it in rubble.

Located northwest of Ojai, the site held one of California's famous mineral springs resorts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The entire 9-acre property, including hot springs, a cold-water spring and the buildings, is designated as a Ventura County historic landmark. Of particular note were a post office and swimming pool dating from the early 1900s, according to a historian who surveyed the site several years before the fire.

The most important building on the site was considered to be the 1902 post office, which had three walls still standing after the fire. The swimming pool built around the same time also survived along with a portion of the pool house beside it.

Nothing will be left except a historical marker after the demolition is completed in January, said Glenn Shephard, director of the Ventura County Watershed Protection District. The agency owns the property that is expected to become a staging area for the removal of the Matilija Dam and later turned into a public recreation area.

Officials said this is the last remaining site in Ventura County where buildings were destroyed by the fire that still needs to be cleaned up. The blaze that started Dec. 4, 2017, destroyed 1,063 structures in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

'Nothing left' or poor precedent

The cleanup has been slowed by a dispute between the watershed district and the Ventura County Cultural Heritage Board over the future of the property, Shephard said. The heritage board took a strong stand against the demolition at the site that dates from the late 1880s, denying the district a certificate for the project in March and urging additional study.

One possibility was to get an update done of a 2012 historical study of the site. That was not done, said Shephard, who did not see the need.

The official said he took the heritage board's concerns under advisement, but did not believe anything was worth saving.

“There is nothing left of that site,” he said. “They wanted to save ruins.”

Gary Blum, chairman of the heritage board, said recently that the county-affiliated district’s position was unique in his memory during 24 years on the board.

“This is the first time I have known the county to demolish something historic that it owns,” he said.

Ultimately, though, the district could proceed once a 180-day period expired after the heritage board’s denial.

The district did that, receiving a county permit in October to remove the remnants of 14 structures and the pool.

No board review

Shephard said he believed that was the “appropriate” course, based on a looming deadline for debris removal at the end of the year, the advice of county managers and an attorney, the liability for injury if someone should fall into holes in the burned-out structures and the risk from the hazardous materials in the debris.

The district reserved the right to appeal the heritage board’s denial to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, but never exercised it. The agency was not prepared to proceed within the allotted time, Shephard said.

Since neither the district nor anyone else appealed, the final decisions were made privately by county managers and not in a public airing of the issue before county supervisors.

<https://www.vcstar.com/picture-gallery/news/local/2019/04/16/see-historic-matilija-hot-springs-property-decay/3438636002/>

See the historic Matilija Hot Springs property in decay

Photos of the historic Matilija Hot Springs property. Many of the structures were destroyed by the Thomas Fire.

The issue also might have reached the board floor if a county contract for the demolition work needed approval. But there was no contract to be approved because the cleanup cost of up to \$850,000 is covered by insurance. The county’s insurer is paying a contractor directly for the cleanup of the site that tested positive for asbestos and other hazardous materials, officials said.

‘Compelling reasons’

Shephard said he informed aides in the office of Supervisor Steve Bennett of the demolition because the property lies in the district that Bennett represents. He did not inform the full board, he said, noting that the project did not require board approval.

Supervisors Bob Huber and John Zaragoza said they did not know about the project until informed by The Star, but neither objected.

“I am not familiar with it,” said Huber, who noted that he is generally supportive of historical causes. “I want to defer to the supervisor from that area.”

Zaragoza said the board could have perhaps been informed of the demolition, but took no particular objection to how the matter was handled. Supervisors Kelly Long and Linda Parks did not return calls seeking comment.

Bennett approved of the way county managers handled the matter.

“I just think staff has the technical background to know what is doable and what is not,” he said. “I think they had compelling reasons for that, so I think it was handled appropriately.”