

BILTMORE RESORT

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Bartolo Development is considering acquiring and redeveloping the 247-room hotel with condominium towers. The deal also could include the Belleview Biltmore Golf Club, established in 1925, and the Belleview Biltmore Cabana Club on Clearwater's Sand Key.

The threatened demolition of what has been called the world's largest occupied wooden structure has ignited howls of protest from preservationists and residents throughout the Tampa Bay area.

"We've got enough condos. We don't need to tear down something that's that significant to put up condos," said Glenda LaFaye, 57, a Tampa resident who has stayed at the Biltmore several times with her husband, Chuck. "To even consider something like that is ridiculous."

Several said they wanted to become involved in any organized effort to save the beloved building, including Hartle.

He and his wife, who have two boys ages 4 and 2, have repeatedly visited the Victorian-themed hotel since their wedding.

"We go back all the time. It's a lot of memories for us," Hartle said. "Not only that, it's got so much personality and charm. It's sad to hear they could potentially knock it down and put up condos."

Ed Kobel, president of DeBartolo



Tribune photo by CRYSTAL L. LAUDERDALE

The hotel built in 1897 is on the National Register of Historic Places and is among the area's most well-known places.

Development, did not return telephone calls Wednesday from the Tribune. He previously said the company would need a consensus of support from the surrounding community before it would proceed with any redevelopment plan.

Based on the initial public reaction, though, that's not likely.

"I would certainly hate to see it go," said Stephen Fowler, Belleair's deputy mayor. "But I understand the economics of it, too."

Richard Wilhelm, the Biltmore's general manager, reiterated Wednesday that the resort has not changed hands.

"The hotel's not going to be razed in the very near future," he said. "The hotel's not sold. There's no hard contract out there with anybody."

Wilhelm said he spent his day reassuring the hotel's 240 full-time workers, some in tears, and patrons worried about the resort's fate.

"I had to spend an hour with [em-

ployees] in groups, going over the whole thing, calming them back down," he said. "The phone rang off the hook with brides having weddings here absolutely panic-stricken."

The Biltmore dates to 1897. The stately waterfront hotel, built on a bluff overlooking Clearwater Harbor, has been dubbed the "White Queen of the Gulf."

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