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Tribune photos by MARK GUSS

The idea of the Belleview Biltmore's destruction troubles some. "I think it'd be a shame to see such a beautiful hotel disappear from the face of the earth," says David Hutcherson, chairman of Belleair's preservation board.

RENOWNED HOTEL

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forward on it, we would go forward in light of developing community support with whatever the redevelopment plan would be.

"It's a small, wonderful community and one of the wealthiest on the West Coast of Florida, a fabulous place to live," he said. "And we would want to do something that would enhance the overall feeling and everything that's going on in Belleair."

Yet preservationists and some elected officials are troubled by the idea of losing what has been called the world's largest occupied wooden structure, built on a bluff overlooking Clearwater Harbor.

"I think it'd be a shame to see such a beautiful hotel disappear from the face of the earth," said David Hutcherson, chairman of the historic preservation board for the town of 4,114 residents.

Belleair Town Manager Steve Cottrell, who said he hears rumors about the Biltmore being sold about once a year, said no plans for the property have been filed with the town.

The resort's general manager, Richard Wilhelm, would neither confirm nor deny DeBartolo's interest. Its owners, Belleview Biltmore Resort Ltd., could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

"The ownership does not discuss any transactions, but I can tell you the resort is not sold," said Wilhelm, president and chief executive officer of Trust Hotels and Resorts, which manages the Biltmore.

Wilhelm said business had been "extremely good. And we're looking forward to just a super 2005."

County Commissioner Karen Seel, whose Clearwater district includes the Biltmore, said the hotel should be relocated rather than dismantled.

"I'd just hate to see the largest wooden structure of that type in the United States pulled down," she said. "It's such a beautiful building, and such a landmark."

Pinellas County Property Appraiser Jim Smith, who leases space at the Biltmore for a small arts gallery, heard rumors about its possible sale while at the Belleair Country Club several weeks ago.

"I would care because I think the hotel is a great place," Smith said. "And I'd hate to see something happen to it."

"But given that, it's full of termites and dry rot. I guess it's only a matter of time before it goes. We all have to go sooner or later."

Wilhelm said the hotel "is in good shape," and denied it has problems with termites or decaying wood. Its roof was damaged by Hurricane Jeanne, "but we're working fast pull-



The developers have discussed giving the ballroom's stained glass ceiling to Pinellas' Heritage Village, a collection of the county's historic buildings.



Tribune map

ing it back together," Wilhelm said.

The Biltmore is the only one of the great hotels built by Florida's railroad tycoons before 1900 that still exists as a resort. It has survived The Great Depression, world wars, foreclosure and multiple owners since Henry B. Plant opened it on Jan. 15, 1897.

"It would be such a shame to see it come down after withstanding all that it has over the years," Hutcherson said.

The 247-room hotel, which employs about 240 full-time workers, sits on prime real estate. Seven years ago, Atlanta hotel investor Salim

Jetha and his family bought the resort for \$16 million.

The Biltmore has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1979.

However, the listing is "basically a recognition of historic properties" that are not automatically afforded protection from demolition, said Carl Shiver, an architectural historian for the Florida Department of State's division of historical resources in Tallahassee.

Kobel, though, said DeBartolo would strive to preserve historic elements of the hotel.

The company, for instance, has had discussions about possibly donating the Tiffany-era stained-glass ceilings from the resort's ballroom to the county's Heritage Village park.

Heritage Village director Jan Luth said she was made aware of those discussions by a park volunteer but has not been contacted by anyone from DeBartolo.

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