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Gene Axelrod and Vicki Bond of Knight Development Corp. plan to expand and rename Westside Racquet Club.

Racquet Club Scores Win Over Neighbors

By KENNETH J. FANUCCHI, *Times Staff Writer*

When Knight Development Corp. bought the Westside Racquet Club last year, the new ownership expected neighbors to welcome plans to refurbish the run-down, 60-year-old facility that once was a retreat for such Hollywood luminaries as Humphrey Bogart and Errol Flynn.

Owned in the past by, among others, Ernie Kovacs and Jack Lemmon, the Cheviot Hills club at 3084 Motor Ave. has fallen on hard times. The roof leaks, the kitchen is outdated and repairs are needed everywhere, according to Gene Axelrod, president of the corporation.

"We thought the people living near the club would welcome us with open arms," Axelrod said. "We planned to fix up the

facility, bring it up to modern standards and develop it into a first-class recreational and social club.

"Surprise! We have not been able to overcome the fears of a small group of homeowners who refuse to believe that we will be good neighbors. They have opposed us at every opportunity, despite our best efforts to reach an accommodation with them. We still intend to be a good neighbor."

The company will have a chance to stand by its promises. After winning approval to proceed with construction, refurbishing is due to begin Monday.

Opponents of Axelrod's plans would like to be able to accept his assurances, said

Jerold Steiner, a board member of the Cheviot Hills Homeowners Assn., which has led the fight against the club.

"The problem is," Steiner said, "that we want more than assurances. We want controls to be placed on the operation of the club to guarantee that there will not be excessive noise, parking in the neighborhood and a general intensification of activities at the facility.

"In the past, neighbors have had to live with all of those problems—noisy parties until all hours of the night, parking in the neighborhood, urinating on people's lawns when they leave the club. While we recognize the club's right to exist, we will

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accept nothing less than tight controls to preserve the tranquility of the neighborhood."

Steiner and Axelrod made their comments after a Los Angeles Board of Zoning Administration decision Tuesday that allowed Knight Development, a Hawaii-based developer, to refurbish the building without a public hearing.

Axelrod said he plans to rename the facility the Beverly Hills Country Club, charge members a fee of \$5,000 or \$8,000 and provide them with "first-class" dining, health, exercise and relaxation facilities. He also plans to provide such business amenities as offices and limousine service.

The Cheviot Hills Homeowners Assn. and two other complainants had argued that a public hearing was required under city law because the developer was planning to change the operating conditions of the club established by the zoning administrator 30 years ago when the clubhouse was expanded to its existing size.

The homeowners maintained that the only approved uses for the existing facility are tennis, swimming, a limited number of gym activities, casual dining and drinking.

Lengthy Arguments

After listening to nearly six hours of arguments from both sides, the board ruled 3 to 1 that a public hearing was not required and that Chief Zoning Administrator Frank B. Eberhard was correct in approving the refurbishment because there was no increase planned in the size of the 34,000-square foot structure.

Board members and Eberhard expressed sympathy for the homeowners and said that they will closely monitor both Knight Development's building plans and future club operations to ensure that club activities do not disrupt the neighborhood.

"We heard the words of assurance from Eberhard," Steiner said. "We simply do not think they mean anything."

The association will meet Monday to consider several options, including a possible appeal for a City Council hearing, a lawsuit and meetings with Axelrod to reach an agreement on operations that satisfies the club's neighbors, Steiner said.

Steiner said most of the approximately 1,800 homeowners in the area support the association's position on the club. This does not include Country Club Estates, a group of 450 homeowners who have reached an agreement with Knight Development Corp. to sub-

mit disputes to arbitration.

Eberhard said in an interview after the hearing that he and board members were frustrated by the case and the action taken because they sympathize with neighborhood fears about future operation of the facility.

'Cannot Act on Fear'

"But as a matter of law," Eberhard said, "we cannot act on fear or speculation. We can only deal with violations when they occur—and we will act if there are violations."

He said that such a facility could not be built in a residential area today and that had he been the zoning administrator in 1955 he would have imposed tighter restrictions on the club's activities.

"But that is knowing what I know now," Eberhard said. "The rights of the club were established in 1926, when it opened, and in 1955 when it was expanded. You do not lose those rights unless you violate the law and become a public nuisance."

Axelrod said that construction, landscaping and other improvements, totaling \$7.5 million, are due to be completed in 10 months.

He said the number of members will increase from between 200 and 300 to at least 1,000 to make the organization a viable private club. Members will be nominated by the club's board of directors, which includes, among others, Occidental Petroleum's Armand Hammer, Unocal's Fred L. Hartley, actors Rafer Johnson, Tom Selleck and Jim Nabors, tennis player Martina Navratilova, lawyers Charles Manatt and Paul Ziffren and UCLA Chancellor Charles E. Young and Prof. Norman Cousins.

When the club was established in 1926, membership was largely composed of employees of 20th Century Fox, including many motion picture personalities. The 1937 membership list, for example, included, in addition to Bogart and Flynn, Claire Trevor, Cesar Romero, Johnny Weismuller, William Wyler and Robert Montgomery.

Axelrod said that few people connected with the motion picture industry are members today and that new membership probably will come primarily from business and industry.