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Lop off the top? Cut out the middle? Architect put in new, surreal situation

By Roger Showley

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

June 28, 2007

Commercial architect Brian Paul has designed many award-winning office buildings in his 35-year career.

Now, for the first time, he faces a challenge any architect would dread: demolishing part of a \$45 million office building he designed to make it comply with Federal Aviation Administration requirements for flight safety at nearby Montgomery Field.

Sunroad Enterprises officials announced earlier this week that they will abide by FAA rules and Mayor Jerry Sanders' order and lower the Sunroad Centrum I building.

Paul, who said it will take two to three weeks to settle on demolition and design plans, was not authorized to give details about the options being considered.

But he said the new design will undoubtedly mean sacrificing the signature, sloping roof that distinguishes the building from the run-of-the-mill office towers that populate so many of San Diego's suburban office parks.

"This has never happened before, never," he said yesterday, sounding sad and resigned on the phone. "This is truly a unique thing. I've never done it before."

After the new design is approved, Paul said structural and mechanical engineers and other design consultants will need up to seven weeks to work out the details and submit them to the city's Development Services Department.

He estimated it could take 2½ to five months more to get a building permit and several more months to demolish and rebuild part of the 180-foot structure. The office tower, which was scheduled to open in July, probably won't be ready for tenants until early next year, he said.

All the building systems, such as heating and air conditioning equipment, electrical wiring and plumbing lines, have been installed, he said. "Anything we do will have to modify that."



JOHN R. MCCUTCHEN / Union-Tribune

The Sunroad office tower probably won't be ready for tenants until early next year, said the architect who designed the building.

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Sunroad had boasted that the office tower would be the first LEED-CS certified building in San Diego County, which means its core and structure would meet environmental energy-efficiency standards set by the U.S. Green Building Council. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

No direct economic benefits flow from such a designation, but Sunroad could be eligible for state and federal tax rebates for installing energy-efficient building systems, said Steve Kapp, president of the local chapter of the green building council.

But Kapp said Sunroad could lose certification credits if the efficiency of the original design is sacrificed to make the building shorter or if tons of construction material must be hauled to the dump rather than be recycled.

Structural engineers and architects not associated with the project or the city said many details must be worked out before the building can be rebuilt.

The first question is whether the height can be reduced by simply lopping off the top two floors – or whether a midsection would be sliced out and the top attached to the shorter bottom.

Kenneth D. Walsh, a structural engineering professor at San Diego State University, said removing the top of a building isn't easy.

“The roofing system is probably the most complicated membrane in the structure, so you don't want to just fool around and redo that on a whim,” Walsh said.

But Walsh said it would be much more costly to remove a section from the middle than to simply take off the top and install a new roof.

Kurt Hunker, who teaches at the New School of Architecture and Design in downtown San Diego, said the seismic safety of the building must be recalculated and may pose additional headaches if the existing roof is key to ensuring the building's structural integrity in a quake.

He called the demolition phase “laborious and messy” since crews will have to find a way to build scaffolding and erect a crane to move concrete, steel and equipment out of the way.

“You can't simply pitch an I-beam over the side,” he said.

Both Walsh and Hunker said they intend to use the Sunroad project in their classes as a case study in how politics and engineering mix uneasily in the real world.

“The technical challenges are far smaller than the political challenges,” Walsh said.

■ Roger M. Showley: (619) 293-1286; roger.showley@uniontrib.com

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By La Playa Heritage on 06/28/2007

A photograph of the frame of the structure shows that yes the decorative, non-structural sloping ramp on the roof has to be taken down.
<http://www.laplayaheritage.com/Documents/CITY%20OF%20SAN%20DIEGO/Sunroac>

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By tangodancer on 06/28/2007

The architect says this has "never, never happened before" which may be true, but it's also true that a developer has never, never before defied an FAA determination of hazard. So he can't really complain about the situation.

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