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Trust wary of new look for Burnham Beeches

By ROYCE MILLAR

A developer's plan to transform the historic Dandenong Ranges landmark, Burnham Beeches, into a 110-room hotel and health resort threatens the heritage significance of the property, the National Trust has warned.

The new owner of the 1930s modern-style mansion, the Lustig and Moar Group, has sought approval from the Yarra Ranges Shire and Heritage Victoria for alterations to the existing building and construction of a large function room and self-contained units.

The alterations will see the heritage-listed Burnham Beeches, which has been unoccupied for some years, reincarnated as an upmarket hotel with new swimming pool, spa, health therapy centre and licensed restaurant — a

resort described by Lustig and Moar as "incomparable to anything else in Victoria". But the makeover would also mean demolition of a gardener's cottage, removal of trees, and a reworking of the mansion's interior which, the trust says, would compromise its heritage integrity.

Lustig and Moar's general manager, Mr David Parsons, said the proposed alterations to the historic main building were minor and not controversial. He said construction of the new buildings might require removal of "a few unimportant eucalypts" but none of the exotic trees for which the gardens are renowned. He said the alterations were essential to make the hotel viable — the number of failed attempts to commercially revive the mansion "bears testimony to that".

A National Trust conservation officer, Mr Rohan Storey, said that while the trust wanted to see the property used, it had not seen figures to justify the "excessive" renovations.

He said the changes to the mansion interior were unsympathetic, the new function room was "too big" and "too close to the house", the demolition of the gardener's cottage was unacceptable and removal of trees would detract from the gardens.

Mr Parsons said he was happy to consult the National Trust further and did not want an "adversarial punch-out".

The Yarra Ranges Shire Council and Heritage Victoria are considering the plans. The Planning Minister, Mr Rob Maclellan, has amended the local planning scheme to allow the project to proceed if supported by the council.

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