

CITY OF PALM DESERT STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: April 25, 2024

PREPARED BY: Vanessa Mager, Management Analyst

REQUEST: ADOPT THE PALM DESERT RAIL STATION FEASIBILITY STUDY

RECOMMENDATION:

1. Adopt the Palm Desert Rail Station Feasibility Study.
2. Direct staff to submit the study to Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) for their consideration to include in the Tier 2 study.

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS:

In July 2022, the Riverside County Transportation Commission (“RCTC”) adopted a Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement (Federal) and Environmental Impact Report (“EIS/EIR”) (State) for the “*Coachella Valley – San Gorgonio Pass Rail Corridor Service*” plan to extend daily passenger rail service to the Coachella Valley. The new rail service would provide a 144-mile connection to Los Angeles’ Downtown Union Station, as well as a connection to the Metro and Metrolink system. These plans are a coordinated effort between RCTC, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and the Federal Rail Administration (FRA). The adopted Tier 1 plan explored potential rail stations for the Coachella Valley including:

- Palm Springs (existing)
- “Mid-Valley” (**new**)
- Indio / Coachella (**new**)

With the adoption of the Tier 1 plan, RCTC, Caltrans, and the FRA, began strategizing for the Tier 2 study to identify specific rail station locations within the Coachella Valley and provide environmental clearance for those identified locations. To position the City of Palm Desert as the best “Mid-Valley” location and to participate in the Tier 2 planning process, the City Council approved a Rail Station Feasibility Study and contracted with Kimley-Horn and Associates. The objectives of this study were as follows:

- Assess the existing land uses, transportation network, demographics, topography, and economic conditions in Palm Desert.
- Identify and evaluate strategic alternatives to enhance multi-modal traffic and circulation in and around the preferred site.
- Show the viability of Palm Desert as a passenger rail station stop for Amtrak along its existing Sunset Limited train service and/or as part of the Coachella Valley–San Gorgonio Pass.
- Analyze a design for a suitable platform for intercity passenger rail service.
- Evaluate current public transit services provided by Sunline Transit Agency, which provides daily bus services.

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- Provide an analysis on Sunline’s current bus routes and ridership to establish the best permanent transportation hub that will serve all residents and accommodate other transportation modes to reduce single-occupancy vehicle use.
- Identify the most appropriate site for a rail station facility along the 6.5-miles of rail line along Palm Desert’s northern boundary.
- Develop a conceptual design that demonstrates how an accessible station would function.

Study Highlights:

With Palm Desert’s central Coachella Valley location, its wide array of recreational, educational, shopping, housing, and entertainment opportunities, arts and cultural activities, and world-class events, the City is the ideal location for a Mid-Valley rail station.

Palm Desert benefits from approximately 6.5-miles of rail line along the City’s northern boundary and Kimley-Horn identified multiple potential sites along the line (map below).



The City, in collaboration with the project team, actively engaged the community through two public meetings and the creation of an Engage Palm Desert page, ensuring that residents' and business owner voices were heard and valued in the decision-making process regarding the preferred station location. These gatherings facilitated discussions on various aspects of the future Transit Hub, such as design principles, context, fit, adjacencies, and site constraints, while also delving into the potential benefits of a new passenger rail station for residents and visitors.

Following extensive research and community feedback, the selection of the site was guided by inclusive criteria, emphasizing the importance of community input and participation. The preferred site, identified as Site C3 in the feasibility study and depicted in the accompanying image, lies strategically between Cook Street and Frank Sinatra Drive, along the north side of Gearld Ford Drive. This location was identified as the preferred site for enhancing rider

experience and mobility, accessibility, and proximity to marque institutions and facilities. Site C3's significance extends beyond its functional attributes as it serves as a vital link to the heart of the Coachella Valley and accessibility to the CSUSB Palm Desert campus, housing and commercial land-uses, and connectivity to neighboring cities. Its visibility from the freeway, proximity to transit-oriented development, and accessibility to the Acrisure Arena further reinforce its suitability for the project. Notably, Cook Street has been designated as a "multimodal corridor" in the General Plan, underscoring C3's alignment with broader regional transportation goals and making it the recommended location for a potential Mid-Valley station.

In an effort to ensure thorough consideration of potential locations, multiple meetings were also convened with key stakeholders to gather their feedback and insights. Engaging with organizations such as RCTC, CSUSB, The Berger Foundation, Acrisure Arena, SunLine Transit, Coachella Valley Water District, Southern California Gas Company, and Imperial Irrigation District, the project team sought to identify and address any potential concerns or limitations.

Through these consultations, all participating organizations expressed support for C3 as the favored location, echoing the sentiments of the community. Their endorsement were based on shared recognition of the site's strategic advantages and alignment with the project's objectives. This consensus further underscores the collaborative approach taken in decision-making, reflecting a unified vision for the successful implementation of the project.

STRATEGIC PLAN:

- Tourism and Marketing – Priority 1: “Improve access to Palm Desert and its attractions to enhance the ease of lifestyle.”
- Transportation – Priority 3: “De-emphasize single/low-occupancy vehicles and optimize multiple modes of travel (bus, carpool, bicycle, and pedestrian).”

DISCUSSION:

CV Rail Subcommittee Recommendation:

The CV Rail subcommittee, comprising City staff members from the Economic Development team, Mayor Quintanilla, Mayor Pro Tem Harnik, and representatives from Kimley Horn, actively contributed to the feasibility study process. They now recommend adopting the feasibility study and submitting it to RCTC for consideration in its Tier 2 study.

Project Description:

The feasibility study, existing site and area conditions, and public opinion support the addition of a rail station in Palm Desert. Staff's recommendation is to accept and adopt the Palm Desert Rail Feasibility Study as presented and direct staff to provide the study to RCTC for their consideration to include in its Tier 2 study.

Upon receiving the directive, staff will promptly submit the study to RCTC for their consideration. RCTC has obtained the necessary funding to initiated the Tier 2 study and they indicated their readiness to commence the study by year-end. They estimate completion of the study in the next two to six years depending on environmental review. Although submittal of the Palm Desert

Rail Feasibility Study does not guarantee the City will be selected for the “Mid-Valley” stop, it does put the City in the best position. Unfortunately, with the anticipated timeline of the Tier 2 study the City may not know if it is selected until mid-way through RCTCs study. RCTC has indicated that the city in which a rail station is located will bear all costs related to its construction and operation. Hence, should Palm Desert be chosen, the City will be required to identify funding sources. Kimley-Horn and associates have identified potential funding sources, outlined in the report. Rail service is expected to commence by 2040.

Legal Review:

This report has been reviewed by the City Attorney’s office.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact to the City’s General Fund for adoption of this study.

ATTACHMENT:

1. Palm Desert Rail Feasibility Study