

**CITY OF PALM DESERT  
PLANNING COMMISSION  
STAFF REPORT**

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MEETING DATE: August 20, 2024

PREPARED BY: Carlos Flores, AICP, Principal Planner

REQUEST: CONSIDERATION TO ADOPT A MITIGATED NEGATIVE DECLARATION AND APPROVE A CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT AND PRECISE PLAN FOR THE LIVING DESERT ZOO AND GARDENS EXPANSION PROJECT

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

Adopt Resolution No. 2877, entitled “A RESOLUTION OF THE PLANNING COMMISSION OF THE CITY OF PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA, ADOPTING A MITIGATED NEGATIVE DECLARATION (CEQA) PURSUANT TO THE CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT AND APPROVING A CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT AND PRECISE PLAN FOR THE LIVING DESERT ZOO AND GARDENS EXPANSION PROJECT LOCATED AT 47900 PORTOLA AVENUE (ASSESSOR’S PARCEL NUMBER 630-250-045 & 625-300-052)”

**BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS:**

*This item was originally on the July 16, 2024, agenda but was continued due to lack of quorum.*

A three-phase master plan for the Living Desert was approved by the City of Palm Desert Planning Commission in 2015 under Precise Plan (PP) / Conditional Use Permit (CUP) 15-370 via Planning Commission Resolution No. 2680. Phases 1 and 2 included construction of a new entry plaza, ticket sales building, gift shop, legacy garden parking lot modifications, and six (6) new animal exhibits. Phase 3 was planned for a new banquet hall building and associated structures to be constructed at a future time, and is the current project proposed.

Additionally, the Living Desert received approval for PP22-0001 by the Planning Commission (PC) on July 5, 2022, via PC Resolution 2815 which included expansion of the existing parking lot, a new 10,356 square-foot (sf) administrative facilities building, and a 4,261 sf storage building.

The proposal is a request by Prest Vuksic Greenwood Architects (Applicant) on behalf of the Living Desert (Owner) to develop a new 37,650 sf event center, a second-story administrative office, a new 1,250 sf entrance structure, and the addition of three (3) new lion habitats within the existing Living Desert Zoo and Gardens facility (Living Desert), as part of Phase 3.0 of the Living Desert Master Plan. The proposed improvements have been reviewed and found to comply with the applicable development standards.

### Architectural Review Commission (ARC)

On April 9, 2024, the City’s ARC took the following action after consideration of Design Review Approval for the project:

Following discussion, MOTION BY COMMISSIONER LATKOVIC, SECOND BY COMMISSIONER MCAULIFFE, CARRIED 6-0 (CHAIR VUKSIC RECUSED); to approve Case No. DR23-0010 as presented.

#### Project Description:

##### A. Property Description

The project site (Site) is an existing zoo and nature preserve located off Portola Avenue, within the City of Palm Desert and City of Indian Wells. Approximately 32.74 acres of the facility are within the City of Palm Desert. The approximate gross acreage of the currently proposed project is 5 acres.

##### B. Zoning, General Plan and Adjacent Uses

**Table 1 Adjacent Land Use and Designations**

	<b>Existing Uses</b>	<b>Zoning</b>
<b>Project Site</b>	Living Desert	Public Institution (P)
<b>North</b>	Existing Residential	PR-3
<b>South</b>	Existing Residential	PR-7
<b>East</b>	City of Indian Wells	N/A
<b>West</b>	Existing Residential	PR-3 and PR-7

##### C. Project Description

The applicant is proposing the following:

- A new “Connie and Bob Lurie Event Center” (Event Center) which will total 37,650 sf inclusive of: 13,130 sf event space, 20,620 sf kitchen and back of house, and 7,490 sf administrative office.
- A new 1,250 sf entrance/ticketing structure (Entry Pavilion)
- Three (3) new lion habitats (Lion Habitat) totaling approximately 36,000 sf, complete with lion care facilities, shade/viewing structures, and interactive pathways.

##### Site Plan

The site plan (Figure 1 on the following page) shows the location of the proposed buildings and new lion habitats. The buildings will be incorporated into the existing Living Desert and complement existing buildings and operations. The new Entry Pavilion will be located directly west of the existing Chase Building. The Event Center will be north of the entry pavilion and include views of the new Lion Habitats.

There are no proposed changes to parking or off-site improvements as part of this project. Previously approved and constructed improvements from PP15-370 and PP22-0001 included improvements to Portola Avenue and the addition of parking spaces which will assist in accommodating the currently proposed project.

**Figure 1 – Site Plan**



### Architecture

The proposed project architecture for all of the new buildings is characterized as modern desert contemporary utilizing natural stone veneer, corten steel panels, cemrock, and glass blocks. The buildings architecture are consistent with each other and with the existing Living Desert buildings and the environment within the project site. The buildings include mostly tan colors and incorporate shade elements, glass to view the zoo operations, and rock features throughout the buildings. The Lion Habitats include thatch roofs, rocks, glass, shades, and special design considerations for the zoo operations.

**Figure 2 – Elevations (Event Center)**



① COLORED ELEVATION - EAST  
1/8" = 1'-0"



② COLORED ELEVATION - NORTH  
1/8" = 1'-0"

③ COLORED ELEVATION - SOUTH  
1/8" = 1'-0"

**Figure 3 – Elevations (Entry Pavilion)**



④ COLORED EAST ELEVATION  
3/16" = 1'-0"

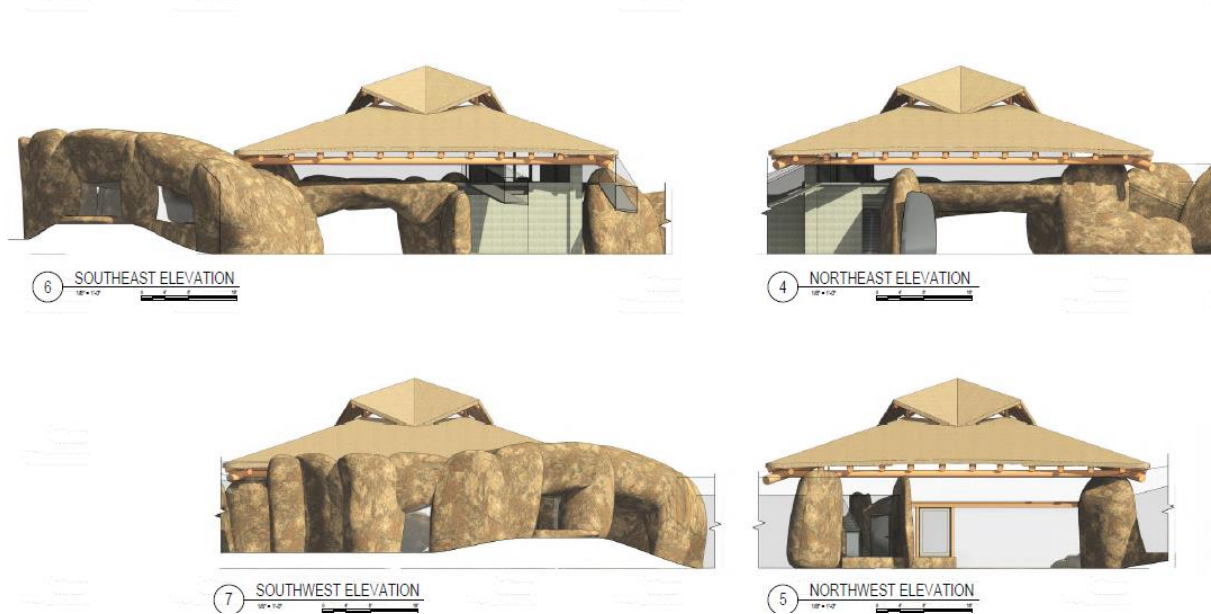


⑤ COLORED SOUTH ELEVATION  
3/16" = 1'-0"



⑥ COLORED WEST ELEVATION  
3/16" = 1'-0"

**Figure 4 – Elevations (Lion Habitat)**



### Landscaping

The applicant proposes a total of 29,573 sf of new landscaping surrounding all of the newly proposed buildings and Lion Habitats. The landscape palette will include palm trees of different sizes and species, shade trees, and rocks and grass throughout the area which are consistent and complementary with the existing landscaping and natural environment at the Living Desert.

### ANALYSIS

#### Development Standards

The zoning designation is Public Institution (P). Development in the P zone is subject to development standards provided under PDMC 25.22.040. The current project meets all the development standards in the P zone. The applicant must still undergo final staff review for compliance with Engineering and Fire Department requirements.

#### Environment Assessment/Environmental Review:

Under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the State CEQA guidelines, an Initial Study has been prepared to analyze the environmental impacts of the project. The documents have been completed in compliance with the CEQA, the State CEQA Guidelines, and the City of Palm Desert local CEQA guidelines. The document finds that all environmental impacts of the project are either insignificant or can be mitigated to a less than significant level pursuant to the mitigation measures outlined in the Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND). The Mitigated Negative Declaration and the corresponding Mitigation Monitoring Reporting Program can be found attached to Attachment 1 (Resolution) as “Exhibit A”.

The City published a Notice of Intent to Adopt a Mitigated Negative Declaration on June 10, 2024, in accordance with CEQA guidelines. The public review period for the MND was from June 10, 2024, through July 1, 2024. The City received two (2) comment letters which have been responded to (Attachment 6).

**Public Notification:**

Public noticing was conducted for the meeting of July 16, 2024, Planning Commission meeting per the requirements of PDMC Section 25.60.060 and Government Code Sections 65090 to 65095. During the meeting, the project was continued to a date certain of August 6, 2024, due to a lack of quorum. The August 6, 2024, Planning Commission meeting was subsequently canceled due to a lack of quorum for the project.

Public noticing was conducted for the meeting of August 20, 2024, Planning Commission meeting per the requirements of PDMC Section 25.60.060 and Government Code Sections 65090 to 65094. A public hearing notice was published a minimum of 10 days before the hearing date on Friday, August 9, 2024, in *The Desert Sun* newspaper. Notices were mailed to all property owners within 300 feet of the project site. One comment letter was received (Attachment 7).

The Applicant held a Community Engagement meeting on May 29, 2024, at the Living Desert Zoo and Gardens. The meeting was attended by approximately 80+ people. Residents asked questions on the process for lion habitats, timeline, and zoo mechanics. There was positive feedback on the project from the residents, including praise for the Living Desert on their traffic circulation changes during events.

**Findings of Approval:**

Findings of Approval can be found in Attachment 1, Resolution 2877.

**Legal Review**

This report was reviewed by the City Attorney's office.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Draft Resolution No. 2877  
Exhibit A ISMND  
Exhibit B Conditions of Approval
2. Project Plans
3. ARC Minutes (April 9, 2024)
4. Public Hearing Notice
5. Community Meeting Flyer
6. ISMND Response to Comments
7. Public Comment