

March 20, 2025

MEMORANDUM

Preliminary Assessment, Findings, and Considerations Development and Design in Palm Desert's Hillside Areas

The Hillside Area Objective Design Standards Project

John Kaliski Architects ("Consultant") was retained by the City of Palm Desert ("City") in May 2024 to prepare Downtown and Hillside Objective Design Standards ("ODS"). ODS are design-oriented development standards that are measurable and quantifiable and used to establish baseline design criteria and parameters for projects.

To date, the Consultant has concentrated on completing a preliminary review of materials for the City's hillside areas, including existing ordinances and design standards for the Hillside Planned Residential (HPR) zoning district. Additionally, the Consultant had the opportunity to tour hillside areas with City staff ("Staff") on February 21, 2025, and see existing conditions in the western and southern portions of the City.

This memorandum, in anticipation of a City Council Study Session to be held on March 27, 2025, outlines some preliminary Consultant observations, findings, and considerations for review and comment by decision-makers at the Study Session that will help establish priorities and outcomes for the hillside planned residential areas.

To develop the findings and consideration below, in addition to the review of City materials such as the General Plan and Zoning Code, the Consultant also reviewed a selection of hillside standards in other locales including the following:

- Blaine County, Idaho (see [ORD No. 2023 - 10 Title 10](#))
- Los Angeles Hillside Ordinance (see [LAMC Sec. 12.21.17 1-Fam DUs, Acc. Bldgs. & Addns. Hillside Regs.](#))
- Mulholland Scenic Parkway Specific Plan (see [LA ORD. No. 167,943](#))
- Palm Springs, California (see [Palm Springs ZC Sec. 93.13.00 Hillside developments](#))
- Pitkin County, Colorado (see [Pitkin CO. Design Standards. 7-20-120](#))
- Salt Lake County, Utah (see [Salt Lake CO Foothills and Canyons Overlay Zone](#))
- Santa Barbara, California ([SB Planning Hillside Housing Development](#))

The Consultant found that each of these jurisdictions has developed standards, for instance the visibility of a structure from a designated viewshed, that when taken in total suggested that a more robust approach to hillside topics on a topic-by-topic basis is possible. This suggests that Palm Desert has an opportunity, based upon community and decision-maker input, to craft more design standards that address this city's constraints and opportunities for single-family hillside development. Implementation of additional ideas that establish an agreed upon community baseline for more certainty as relates to hillside development may be addressed both through the ongoing evolution of the City's Unified Development Code (UDC) which generally provides for development standards or through the development of parallel objective design standards, which can either be adopted as a stand-alone document, or incorporated into the UDC.

Existing Hillside Conditions

The Palm Desert hillside is composed of two existing contexts. In the West Hills area, privately-owned parcels developed with single-family land uses are scattered throughout the hillside, while Stone Eagle and Canyons at Bighorn are planned communities that make up the majority of the southern hillside area. In both the southern and western portions of Palm Desert, views to and from the mountains across single-family zones dominate the City's landscape and establish the City's identity, which is characterized by its unique desert setting and landscape. The City acknowledges the value of this identity in its General Plan with the following key open space preservation and hillside development goals.

- **Land Use & Community Character Policy 1.2: Open space preservation.** Balance the development of the City with the provision of open space, and especially the hillsides surrounding the City, so as to create both high quality urban areas and high-quality open space.

Two additional General Plan goals further define the City’s approach to hillside areas and development.

- **Land Use & Community Character Policy 1.5: Hillside development.** Limit development and grading in areas with slopes greater than 20% and limit the density and intensity of development in areas with slopes of between 10 and 19 percent.
- **Environmental Resources Policy 2.3: Hillside grading.** Continue to require the preparation of a grading analysis on hillside development to pre-determine where development should occur so as to minimize the impact of new development of the city’s hillsides.

The policy to “...minimize the impact of new development of the city’s hillsides,” is a primary focus for the Hillside ODS study. ODS can establish more tools that the City can utilize to establish a framework for community expectations of the definition of quality development in the hillsides.

The City regulates hillside design with development standards (see [PD Zoning Sec. 25.10.050A HPR development standards](#)). These include general grading goals to preserve the natural contours of the land, blend in with the natural terrain, and protect viewsheds. Flat building pads and associated grading disturbance are limited to 10,000 SF in size, while residences are not to exceed 4,000 SF inclusive of garages and accessory buildings. At building pads that were developed before passage of these regulations, lot coverage of structures at these pads is limited to 35%. This can be increased to 50% coverage with the approval of the City’s Architectural Review Commission (ARC). Given the many ridges that are visible throughout much of Palm Desert, development is prohibited on or across ridges.

While by code (see [PD Zoning Sec. 25.68.020](#)) the ARC does not review typical single-family residences, the ARC often reviews these projects if it is in a hillside area and exceeds 35% of a previously approved building pad. Staff may also initiate a request for ARC review of a single-family residence (see [PD Zoning Sec. 25.68.030](#)). In practice, there are few new building pads in the hillside areas, and larger homes are often proposed in the hillside planned residential districts that exceed UDC thresholds. These are triggering ARC, Planning Commission, and City Council review of the single-family development type within the hillsides. While a baseline of character, fit, and aesthetic concerns for hillside design may be addressed by additional Palm Desert-specific design standards to meet community goals, to fully establish a clear and certain design path for the hillsides requires careful coordination of objective design standard recommendations, and the development requirements and processes of the City’s UDC. As work is simultaneously underway to improve the UDC, JKA anticipates coordinating its design standards and guidelines recommendations and work products with this parallel UDC effort to help ensure a coordinated set of development and design approaches, standards, and if appropriate guidelines.

To ensure that the Consultant has a directed understanding of community concerns, the following Consultant observations and considerations of hillside conditions are offered and provide an opportunity for comment and input that will shape the work and outcomes of this hillside-oriented planning process.

Hillside Observations and Considerations for Discussion

The following observations and considerations are provided to facilitate input and direction to the Consultant during the Study Session to guide the subsequent development of work product and Project outcomes. These findings and considerations are not exhaustive but represent the Consultant’s first round of observations and considerations. Identification and review of other topics and concerns that should be addressed are welcome.

1. **Views To Hillsides:** Views of the hillsides and mountains from the City are iconic, but due to ongoing single-family development, hillsides are increasingly subject to change in a manner that decreases the conservation of the hillside setting due to grading and siting of building pads.
Consideration: Develop more robust viewshed standards to the hillsides from roadways and streets and across the

field of view of larger developments.

2. **Views From Hillsides:** Views from the mountainsides and hills to the City are spectacular but there are cases where these views are compromised by subsequent development in the hillsides.
Consideration: Standards for hillside building pads, pads in relationship to ridgelines, access roads and drives, and the screening and visibility of new construction could further reduce the visibility of new homes and conserve viewsheds from and across the mountain sides. Additionally, more robust standards for individual developments in the hillsides that address the fit and character of development could be developed. Areas where standards could be further expanded include, but are not limited to:
 - *Grading extent,*
 - *Height in relationship to ridgelines,*
 - *Roofline silhouette(s),*
 - *Extent of scale, mass, bulk and transparency,*
 - *Use of color(s),*
 - *Use of material(s), and*
 - *Extent of visible exterior lighting.*

3. **Use of Native Landscape:** The native desert landscape of the hillsides contributes significantly to the sense of place and identity of both the mountains and the city, but present landscape standards do not fully incorporate use of native and similar flora requirements.
Consideration: Develop more robust standards for landscape in the hillside areas that conserves and fosters the native landscape characteristic of these locations.

4. **Cluster Development:** Planned single-family residential developments emphasize individual lot development as opposed to cluster development that maintains more conserved open space.
Consideration: Develop incentives for clustering of development in hillside areas that conserves more open space and/or conservation easements for sloped areas where new grading cannot occur.

5. **Site Access Standards** Existing roads in some of the hillside areas do not meet minimum access standards that ensure life safety access. In some hillside areas, evidence of erosion due to water flow is visible and utilities are exposed.
Consideration: Develop more base standards and requirements for individual property development in relationship to access, fire safety, flooding, and utilities that ensure life safety for both residents and first responders.

If you have any questions or comments with regard to this memorandum, please contact Planning Staff, Nick Melloni, Principal Planner at nmelloni@palmdesert.gov, and John Kaliski and Ameer Bhatt at jkaliski@jka-la.com and abhatter@jka-la.com respectively.