



February 26, 2025

Mrs. Jan Harnick, Mayor, City of Palm Desert
Mr. Joe Pradetto, Councilmember (District #2), City of Palm Desert
City of Palm Desert
73-510 Fred Waring Drive
Palm Desert, CA 92260

Re: Staff Report, Dated February 27, 2025, *ORDINANCE AMENDING THE PALM DESERT MUNICIPAL CODE TO UPDATE, CLARIFY, AND CODIFY BYLAWS AND GENERAL PROVISIONS FOR THE CITY'S BOARDS, COMMISSIONS, COMMITTEES, AND TASK FORCES*

Dear Honorable Mayor Harnick and Honorable Councilman Pradetto,

The proposed revisions to the Palm Desert municipal code, as recommended by the City Council Subcommittee on Boards and Commissions, risk significantly weakening citizen oversight in critical areas, including environmental preservation, public safety, and cultural resource management. While the stated intentions are to improve efficiency and align with priorities, the changes would effectively reduce transparency, limit public input, and centralize decision-making power. Here's why maintaining robust citizen involvement is essential:

1. Environmental Oversight and Accountability

The decision to limit the Resource Preservation & Enhancement Committee (RPEC) to meet only on an "as-needed" basis undermines consistent environmental oversight. Palm Desert is currently going through a long overdue critical update to our Environmental Plan which will hold the city and its operations to certain measurements and guidelines. While the committee has been trying to put these in place over a long period of time it's been met with challenges from staff relating to lack of staffing and other delays. Palm Desert has ongoing challenges related to climate change, water conservation, and sustainability. RPEC serves as a vital platform for community input and accountability on these issues. By meeting infrequently and solely at the discretion of City Council or staff, the community's voice is effectively silenced, reducing transparency in decision-making.

Recommendation: Maintain a regular meeting schedule for RPEC to ensure continued environmental accountability and proactive community engagement. We are also in the process of updating the outdated Environmental Sustainability Plan with innovative solutions to safeguard Palm Desert against environmental degradation while maintaining leadership in sustainability efforts. Transitioning RPEC to Palm Desert's Sustainability Commission, with standard municipal powers, will enable the implementation of next-generation solutions tailored to the city's needs and reinforce Palm Desert's commitment to environmental stewardship.

2. Public Safety and Law Enforcement Transparency

Public safety and law enforcement require active community participation to build trust and ensure accountability. Reducing the Public Safety Committee's meetings from monthly to every other month decreases opportunities for public oversight on critical issues such as crime rates, staffing levels, police-



community relations, budget review and emergency preparedness. This change risks creating a disconnect between law enforcement practices and community expectations.

Recommendation: Maintain monthly meetings for the Public Safety Committee to ensure consistent public oversight and to address community safety concerns in a timely manner. Given the important nature of this body, it should be elevated to a commission with the requisite municipal powers to ensure our residents are safe and their feedback is valued.

3. Cultural Resources and Community Identity

Palm Desert's rich cultural heritage is a cornerstone of its identity. Scaling back the Cultural Resources Preservation Committee's meetings from monthly to every other month threatens the preservation of historical landmarks, indigenous sites, and cultural programming. Reduced meeting frequency could result in delayed actions and decreased community involvement in safeguarding cultural resources.

Recommendation: Keep monthly meetings for the Cultural Resources Preservation Committee to promote active community participation in preserving and celebrating Palm Desert's cultural heritage.

4. Risks of Centralized Decision-Making and Reduced Public Input

The proposed ordinance centralizes decision-making by restricting committees from initiating discussions and only allowing agenda items referred by City Council or staff. This significantly diminishes the advisory role of committees and discourages proactive citizen involvement. It also risks creating echo chambers that are out of touch with its electorate, where only pre-approved topics are discussed, limiting diverse perspectives.

Recommendation: Empower committees to propose agenda items relevant to their purview, ensuring that citizen voices remain an integral part of local governance even though they may disagree with your position on the matter.

5. Erosion of Civic Engagement and Democratic Participation

The reduction in frequency of the Civic Engagement Committee and other advisory bodies sends a concerning message about the value placed on public participation. In a time when community engagement is crucial for informed governance, limiting these opportunities contradicts democratic principles.

Recommendation: Restore quarterly meetings for the Civic Engagement Committee and maintain regular schedules for all advisory bodies to promote active public participation and transparent governance.

Conclusion

The proposed changes threaten to weaken citizen oversight, transparency, and community involvement in crucial areas affecting Palm Desert's future. A vibrant destination-driven city that is continuing to evolve and relies on robust public participation, particularly in environmental stewardship, public safety, and cultural preservation. Rather than reducing the frequency of meetings or restricting citizen input, the City



Council should strengthen community engagement by enhancing the roles and responsibilities of its appointed bodies.

By maintaining regular meeting schedules, updating outdated policies, and ensuring committees can independently address relevant issues, Palm Desert can safeguard its commitment to transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance.

Respectfully Submitted,

Stephen Nelson
Resident, City of Palm Desert, District 3

Cc:

Yvonne Chi, Deputy Secretary, Equity and Environmental Justice, CalEPA
Sabine Talaugon, Deputy Secretary for Intergovernmental Relations, CalEPA
Dr. Nefretiri Colley, Deputy Secretary for Communications and External Affairs, CalEPA

Attachment(s)-

1. Proposed Ordinance Changes to further limit the powers of committee, commissions and Boards
2. Staff Report- Council nor staff interviewed or met with the members of the committee prior to the development of this report.