

CITY OF PALM DESERT STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: January 8, 2026

PREPARED BY: Carlos Flores, AICP, Deputy Director of Development Services

SUBJECT: CONSIDERATION TO ADOPT HILLSIDE RESIDENTIAL DESIGN
STANDARDS AND A CORRESPONDING ZONING ORDINANCE
AMENDMENT

RECOMMENDATION:

Introduce an Ordinance entitled, “AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA, ADOPTING HILLSIDE RESIDENTIAL DESIGN STANDARDS, MODIFYING SECTIONS OF PALM DESERT MUNICIPAL CODE TITLE 25 PERTAINING TO THE HILLSIDE RESIDENTIAL DESIGN STANDARDS AND FINDING THE PROJECT IS EXEMPT FROM FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT.”

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS:

Executive Summary

The City Council is being requested to consider a City-initiated proposal to establish Hillside Residential Design Standards (“Hillside Standards”) applicable to residential development within the Hillside Planned Residential (“HPR”) Zoning district and make certain necessary amendments to the Palm Desert Municipal Code (“PDMC”).

The City of Palm Desert Planning Commission adopted Planning Commission Resolution 2909 on December 16, 2025, recommending that the City Council approve the proposed Hillside Standards and corresponding Zoning Ordinance Amendment (ZOA).

Background

The City of Palm Desert (the “City”) has long worked to balance protecting its hillsides and preserving views with accommodating single-family homes. Over the years, the City has used neighborhood master plans, updated hillside zoning, grading rules that protect natural landforms, public design review, and the creation of parks and conservation easements to maintain this balance. Still, there are opportunities to improve the consistency and quality of future development. There are concerns that some hillside projects are too visible, that natural topography is being lost, and that the iconic views to and from the hills are being diminished.

On May 21, 2024, the City entered into a Professional Services Agreement (City Contract No. A47670) with John Kaliski Architects (“Consultant”), for assistance with the preparation of objective design standards for the hillside areas. Since May 2024, the Consultant has worked with City staff, the Architectural Review Commission (the “ARC”), the Planning Commission, City Council, and various stakeholders to develop the Hillside Standards. Below is a table summarizing these meetings:

Table 1 - Hillside Meetings

Date	Meeting	Discussion
December 12, 2024	City Council	Formation of Hillside Ad-Hoc Subcommittee meeting consisting of Mayor Harnik and Councilmember Pradetto
March 27, 2025	City Council – Study Session	Presentation on existing conditions and opportunities report
April 8, 2025	Hillside Tour	Subcommittee goes on a tour of the HPR area with City staff and Consultant
June 18, 2025	Community Meeting	Community meeting held at City Hall to discuss Hillside Standards
September 23, 2025	Joint ARC and Planning Commission Meeting	Review of first draft of Hillside Standards
October 20, 2025	City Council Subcommittee meeting	Review of draft Hillside Standards
December 16, 2025	Planning Commission Meeting	Adopted PC Resolution 2909 recommending City Council approve Hillside Standards

The Consultant has prepared the final Hillside Standards for City Council consideration, incorporating feedback from City staff and stakeholders gathered through the meetings listed in Table 1.

Hillside Standards Document

The Hillside Standards (Attachment 1, Exhibit A) are organized by the following chapters:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) HPR Design Standards
- 3) HPR Compliance Checklist
- 4) Glossary

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This section introduces the document and outlines its applicability, exceptions, policy framework, objectives, use of the standards, and approval process.

Applicability

The Hillside Standards shall apply exclusively to single-family housing developments located in the HPR. The HPR zone is generally located along the westernmost city limits and is bounded by areas west of Calle de Los Campesinos, south of Cahuilla Hills Park, and north of Silver Spur Manor, as shown in Attachment 4 (Map).

The Hillside Standards would not apply to or supersede any development that has its own design standards and/or Specific Plan, such as the Stone Eagle development. If a property owner demonstrates that an existing building pad in the HPR zone was approved by the City or County before incorporation of the City, a residential building and accessory structure(s) may be built on a previously approved building pad without a public hearing.

The total area of buildings in the HPR Zone shall be limited to 35 percent of the existing building pad area or a maximum of 2,625 square feet, whichever is less. The total building square footage may be increased up to 50 percent of the existing building pad area and a maximum of 5,250 square feet, whichever is less, with ARC approval, appealable to the Planning Commission.

Objectives

The introduction establishes objectives of the Hillside Standards, which includes: “*clear base standards for the design of projects that will communicate the City’s expectations for design quality. The standards will also help ensure that the identity of the City, its views to and from the hills, are protected and enhanced with each new project. The objectives of the Hillside Residential Design Standards are:*

- 1. Conserve views to and from the City of Palm Desert’s iconic hillsides and mountains.*
- 2. Protect major ridges, public lands, public pathways and trails, and environmentally sensitive areas within the Hillside Planned Residential Zone (HPR). and Hillside Planned Residential Drainageway, Floodplain, Watercourse Overlay Zone (HPR, D).*
- 3. Create a fit that blends the design and placement of buildings, structures, access roads and drives and the existing and natural hillside environment within the HPR and HPR, D Zone areas.*
- 4. Minimize grading associated with building projects and realize graded slopes that merge with and are similar in appearance to the existing and natural topography of the hillsides within the HPR and HPR, D Zone areas.*
- 5. Minimize visual intrusion caused by exterior lighting within the HPR and HPR, D Zone areas.*

Process

As shown in the workflow in Section 1.5 (Page 5) of the Hillside Standards, new development within the HPR is proposed to follow the process below:

- Step 1: Confirm the project site is within the HPR zone and not located on a Major Ridgeline.
- Step 2: Review the Palm Desert General Plan and verify compliance with the Palm Desert Municipal Code Hillside Residential Development Standards.
- Step 3: Ensure the project complies with Chapter 2 of the Hillside Residential Design Standards. Complete the HPR compliance checklist in Chapter 3 and submit a full Precise Plan application.
- Step 4: City staff reviews the project for compliance using the Chapter 3 HPR compliance checklist.
- Step 5a: If the project fully complies with the Hillside Standards, it proceeds directly to the Planning Commission for review and approval.

- Step 5b: If the project does not fully comply, it is reviewed by the ARC, then the Planning Commission for a recommendation, and finally the City Council for approval. Projects may request deviations from up to three standards in Chapter 2 through this process.

Chapter 2 - HPR Design Standards

The design standards in the document “assist project applicants and their designer’s understanding of the minimum design standards that shall be met.” The goal of the design standards is to be objective, without room for subjectivity or future interpretation that allow changes. The design standards are described in Chapter 2 and are organized as follows:

- Section 2.1: Hillside Grading and Ridgeline Protection.
- Section 2.2: Site and Open Space.
- Section 2.3: Trees and Plants.
- Section 2.4: Structure, Building, and Accessory Buildings.
- Section 2.5, Exterior Lighting.
- Section 2.6: Materials and Colors.

Below are examples of standards from each section:

2.1.4: Major Ridgeline protection. Any structure visible from Highway 74 shall be designed such that the highest point of the structure, inclusive of antennas, chimneys, flag poles, parapets, roof ridges, rooftop equipment, satellite dishes, and all building and any accessory components associated with the project, is set at or below any “Major Ridgeline” and within 100 feet of the building and any accessory component(s). Notwithstanding this requirement, if the Project utilizes an existing building pad as determined by the Director of Development Services, any structure and any accessory component associated with a project may not exceed the height limits otherwise required by the Palm Desert Municipal Code.

2.2.6. Structures at slopes greater than 20 percent. On slopes greater than 5:1 (20 percent), structures are prohibited.

2.3.1. Trees, density. A maximum of one tree may be planted for each 3,000 square feet of building pad area.

2.4.7. Roof slopes. No roof slope shall exceed a pitch of one unit vertical to three units horizontal (1:3).

2.5.6. Lighting, bistro and string lights. String and bistro lights are permitted but shall not exceed 60 feet in length and 250 square feet in area, be dimmable, not exceed an average of five maintained footcandles at grade, and be attached to the main structure at a height of not more than 12 feet above grade.

2.6.9. Building wall materials, secondary. In addition to the list of materials in Standard 2.6.8, a second material from the same list or as selected by the applicant may be utilized as secondary and accent materials on a maximum of 30 percent of the total exterior wall area.

Chapter 3 - HPR Compliance Checklist

The document includes a checklist for applicants and staff to use upon a complete application submittal. This checklist is a similar tool that was incorporated for the City-wide residential Multifamily and Mixed Use Objective Design Standards. Use of the checklist would guide project compliance with the Hillside Standards, determine the process, and provide a clear tool for the applicant, staff, and decision makers.

Zoning Ordinance Amendment (Attachment 1, Exhibit B)

To incorporate use of the Hillside Standards, the City has proposed an accompanying Zoning Ordinance Amendment (ZOA) to codify the process changes described in this report, remove the subjective standards, and establish the Hillside Standards as the applicable standards for development with the HPR. Attachment 1, Exhibit B provides a redlined version of the changes to the Palm Desert Municipal Code (PDMC) and Attachment 2 includes a clean version of said changes. PDMC Sections 25.10.050 Development Standards, 25.72.080 Hillside Development Plan, Commission Role, and 25.78.020 Hillside Development Plan are all proposed to be amended.

Environment Assessment/Environmental Review:

The City Council finds that adoption of this ordinance is not a “project,” as defined in the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), because it does not have a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment and concerns general policy and procedures.

Public Review:

Public noticing was conducted for the January 8, 2026, regular meeting of the City Council consistent with PDMC § 25.60.060. A public hearing notice was published in The Desert Sun on December 26, 2025, at least 10 days prior to the hearing date.

Table 1 in the staff report summarizes the public meetings held regarding the updated standards. On March 27, 2025, City Council study session and the June 18, 2025, community meeting included mailed notices to all property owners and architects who had worked on a recent Hillside ordinance updates.

On March 27, 2025, an Engage Palm Desert webpage was launched to inform the public about the project, provide draft documents, and solicit community feedback.

On June 18, 2025, Community Meeting was attended by 12 participants, including property owners and architects. Attendees emphasized the need for standards that are clear and understandable for both property owners and project applicants.

Feedback gathered from all public meetings and site tours informed the consultant’s and staff’s recommendations on appropriate standards, process improvements, and existing site conditions. Key themes from public input included the importance of a clear checklist, architectural designs that blend with surrounding development, and the inclusion of flexibility within the standards

Legal Review:

This report has been reviewed by the City Attorney's Office.

Appointed Body Recommendation:

The City of Palm Desert Planning Commission adopted Planning Commission Resolution 2909 on December 16, 2025, recommending that the City Council approve the proposed Hillside Standards and corresponding Zoning Ordinance Amendment (ZOA).

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

None

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Draft Ordinance
 - a. Exhibit A Hillside Residential Standards
 - b. Exhibit B Zoning Ordinance Amendment
2. Zoning Ordinance Amendment Clean
3. Public Hearing Notice
4. HPR Boundary Map

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AWARENESS CHECKLIST:

- Site-Specific Property Interest** – Councilmembers should check if they own or lease real property within 1,000 feet of the project site (Gov. Code § 87103(b); FPPC Reg. 18702.2).

- SB 1439 Applicability (Campaign Contributions)** – Applies to licenses, permits, or other entitlements for use, and to contracts or franchise agreements other than competitively bid, labor, or personal employment contracts.

Applicant(s)/Appellant(s): City of Palm Desert

Councilmembers should review any campaign contributions received within the last 12 months from parties or participants to the proceeding and must not accept contributions over \$500 from those parties for 12 months following the final decision (Gov. Code § 84308).

Note: These indicators are informational and do not constitute a legal determination. Each Councilmember is responsible for identifying and disclosing any disqualifying interests in accordance with the Political Reform Act and FPPC regulations.