

City of Palm Desert Staff Report

Meeting Date: April 23, 2026

Prepared By: Sijifredo Fernandez, Senior Planner

Department: Development Services

Subject: Re-Introduce for First Reading the Hillside Residential Design Standards and an Ordinance Amending Title 25 of the Palm Desert Municipal Code

Recommendation

Re-introduce an Ordinance, by title only, entitled “AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA ADOPTING HILLSIDE RESIDENTIAL DESIGN STANDARDS, AMENDING PALM DESERT MUNICIPAL CODE TITLE 25 AND MAKING A FINDING THE OF EXEMPTION UNDER THE CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT.”

Executive Summary

The City Council is being asked to consider the re-introduction of the Hillside Residential Design Standards (“Hillside Standards”) applicable to residential development within the Hillside Planned Residential (“HPR”) Zoning district, along with necessary amendments to the Palm Desert Municipal Code (“PDMC”).

Following the City Council’s first reading approval on January 8, 2026, staff conducted a final implementation review and identified opportunities to refine building pad size limits, maximum building area thresholds, and code cross-references. The proposed revisions clarify language, ensure internal consistency, and align with prior direction from the Planning Commission and City Council.

The revised standards were unanimously recommended for approval by the Planning Commission and are now resubmitted to the City Council for first reading consideration.

Background

At the request of City Council, staff initiated an update to the Hillside Residential Design Standards to establish objective standards for single family development within the Hillside Planned Residential (HPR) zoning district. Additionally, a City Council subcommittee was established to provide guidance throughout the process. The updated standards provide clear, objective regulations intended to protect hillside views, natural landforms, landscaping, and neighborhood character while creating a more predictable development review process.

Initially, on December 16, 2025, the Planning Commission adopted Resolution No. 2909 recommending City Council approval of the proposed standards and Zoning Ordinance Amendment (ZOA). The City Council approved the ordinance for first reading on January 8, 2026. Following that action, staff completed a final implementation review and identified

opportunities to refine building pad size limits, maximum building area thresholds, and internal code cross-references.

To address these items, the updated regulations were returned to the Planning Commission with a revised draft that refines development thresholds, clarifies procedural language, and includes technical edits to ensure the standards are internally consistent and administratively enforceable. On March 3, 2026, the Planning Commission unanimously recommended approval of the revised standards.

Key clarifications include:

- Previously approved building pads can proceed without a public hearing if established prior to City incorporation, subject to established limits.
- Total building area is limited to 35 percent of the building pad area or 3,150 square feet, whichever is less.
- Subject to approval by the Architectural Review Commission, the allowable buildable area may be increased to the lesser of 50 percent of the existing pad area or 6,300 square feet.

These refinements and clarifications, consistent with prior direction from the Planning Commission and City Council, are documented in the January 30, 2026, memorandum (Attachment 4).

Appointed Body Recommendation

The City of Palm Desert Planning Commission adopted Planning Commission Resolution No. 2916 on March 3, 2026, recommending that the City Council approve the proposed Hillside Standards and corresponding Zoning Ordinance Amendment (ZOA).

Environmental Review

Zoning Ordinance Amendment (ZOA) is not subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (“Public Resources Code section 21000 et seq.”) (“CEQA”) because it does not qualify as a “project” under CEQA. The State CEQA Guidelines provide that “[a]n activity is not subject to CEQA if ... the activity is not a project as defined in Section 15378.” (State CEQA Guidelines, § 15060(c).)

Section 15378 defines a project as an activity that “has a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment.” (State CEQA Guidelines, § 15378(a).) Here, the ZOA adopts and clarifies objective Hillside Residential Design Standards applicable to properties within the existing Hillside Planned Residential (HPR) zoning district and corrects internal inconsistencies within the Palm Desert Municipal Code. The ZOA does not increase allowable density or expand the geographic area subject to development. Rather, it refines and implements development standards governing building pad size, allowable building area, grading, and design requirements intended to protect hillside views, natural landforms, and neighborhood character, while improving clarity and consistency in the City’s development review process. Because the ZOA does not authorize new development or increase the intensity of development beyond that already

allowed under existing regulations, it will not result in a reasonably foreseeable significant physical change in the environment and therefore does not constitute a “project” under CEQA. (Id., §§ 15060(c), 15378(a).) In addition, the ZOA constitutes an organizational and administrative activity of government that will not result in direct or indirect physical changes in the environment and is therefore excluded from the definition of a “project.” (Id., § 15378(b)(5).)

Even if the ZOA is considered a “project” subject to CEQA, it is exempt from environmental review. The ZOA is exempt pursuant to the “common sense” exemption under State CEQA Guidelines section 15061(b)(3), because it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity may have a significant effect on the environment. As described above, the ZOA does not increase development intensity or density and instead imposes objective standards that limit and regulate development within an existing zoning designation.

In addition, the ZOA is categorically exempt pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines section 15320 (Class 20), which applies to changes in the organization of local agencies. The ZOA clarifies and refines procedures and standards governing the review of development within the existing HPR zoning district and does not change the geographic area in which the City’s existing land use regulatory authority is exercised, nor does it increase allowable density or authorize new land uses. Finally, none of the exceptions to the use of categorical exemptions set forth in State CEQA Guidelines section 15300.2 apply. The ZOA will not result in cumulative impacts, does not present unusual circumstances that would result in a significant environmental effect, will not damage scenic resources within a designated scenic highway, is not located on a hazardous waste site pursuant to Government Code section 65962.5, and will not cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource.

Staff recommends that the City Council direct staff to file a Notice of Exemption for this ZOA with the County Clerk and State Clearinghouse in accordance with State CEQA Guidelines.

Legal Review

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

Financial Impact

There is no financial impact with this action.

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 ZOA25-5001
4. JKA Memorandum dated January 30, 2026

5. Presentation

Conflict of Interest Awareness Checklist

Note: *This checklist is informational only and does not constitute a legal determination. Each Councilmember remains responsible for identifying, disclosing, and evaluating any disqualifying interests under the Political Reform Act and applicable FPPC regulations.*

1. Site-Specific Property Interest

Does this item involve a project site or other identifiable real property?

Yes

No

If yes, identify the project site:

Councilmembers should consider whether they own, lease, or hold interests in real property within 1,000 feet of the project site. (Gov. Code § 87103(b); FPPC Reg. 18702.2).

2. SB 1439 / Gov. Code § 84308 Applicability (Campaign Contributions)

Does this item involve a license, permit, other entitlement for use, or a contract or franchise agreement that is not competitively bid, a labor agreement, or a personal employment contract?

Yes

No

If yes, identify the applicant(s), appellant(s), party, or participant(s):

Councilmembers should review campaign contributions received within the prior 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).