



July 3, 2026

Palm Springs City Council
Sent via email

Re: City Council agenda item 3b July 8, 2026

Dear Honorable Mayor, Mayor Pro Tem, and Members of the Palm Springs City Council,

We are writing to respectfully oppose the proposed blanket removal of palm skirts from more than 2,150 palm trees throughout Palm Springs and suggest an alternative approach.

While we fully support protecting public safety, we believe there is a far more balanced and effective approach. Rather than implementing a one-size-fits-all policy, we urge the City Council to adopt a risk reduction tree-by-tree management plan that protects both public safety and the extraordinary natural heritage that defines Palm Springs.

The City's own staff report states that Palm Springs is "world renowned for its distinctive palm tree-lined streets and parkways" and possesses "one of the largest compositions of heritage-quality California fan palms in their natural state." Those words matter. Palm Springs is recognized throughout the world because of these iconic trees. When people think of our city, they picture Palm Canyon Drive lined with majestic California fan palms, our dramatic skyline beneath the San Jacinto Mountains, and the unmistakable character that has appeared in countless movies, television shows, magazines, postcards, travel guides, and photographs for generations. This proposal would permanently alter one of the defining features that has made Palm Springs one of the most recognizable cities in the world.

It is also worth noting that the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians does not remove the natural skirts from its California fan palms, including trees located in areas with significant pedestrian activity. Their longstanding stewardship demonstrates that preserving palms in their natural state can coexist with public access.

These trees are not simply landscaping. They are living ecosystems. Palm skirts provide important roosting and nesting habitat for species that have long been part of our desert landscape, such as songbirds, insects, reptiles, and yes—even rodents. These same palm skirts provide habitat for owls and other birds of prey that naturally hunt rodents and for bats that consume large numbers of insects, including mosquitoes. Nature functions through balance, not through the widespread removal of habitat. Healthy ecosystems support a diversity of wildlife.

The staff report focuses heavily on rodents and references diseases such as hantavirus, leptospirosis, and salmonellosis. We agree that public health should always be taken seriously. However, the report does not demonstrate that Palm Springs has a documented public health



problem caused by palm skirts, nor does it provide evidence that removing the skirts from more than 2,150 trees will meaningfully reduce those risks.

We are also concerned that the proposal fails to distinguish between California fan palms (*Washingtonia filifera*), California's only native palm species, and Mexican fan palms (*Washingtonia robusta*), which differ in both growth habit and management needs. Native California fan palms deserve special consideration because of their ecological, cultural, and historical significance.

We are very concerned about the process that led to this recommendation. This proposal was originally brought forward in July 2024 but was withdrawn after an enormous amount of public concern, with staff directed to evaluate alternatives. Yet over the past two years there appears to have been little meaningful public outreach or stakeholder engagement. To our knowledge, no public workshops were held, and no meetings were conducted with wildlife organizations, environmental groups, preservation advocates, local businesses, or other interested stakeholders before bringing this recommendation back to the Council. The staff report reads more as an advocacy document supporting a single predetermined outcome than as an objective analysis of alternatives. It largely emphasizes potential risks associated with rodents while giving little consideration to the ecological benefits of palm skirts or the wildlife that depends on them, including owls, bats, nesting birds, and other native species. The Council deserves a balanced analysis of all reasonable options before making a decision that will permanently alter more than 2,150 heritage palm trees.

We believe Palm Springs can protect public safety while preserving the extraordinary character and wildlife habitat that make our city unique. Every city faces risk. Palm Springs has bicyclists riding alongside traffic, outdoor dining next to busy streets, playgrounds, hiking trails, swimming pools, and thousands of mature trees. We don't eliminate these amenities because some level of risk exists. We identify hazards, evaluate them, and take reasonable steps to reduce risk. We should apply that same balanced approach to our heritage palm trees.

The staff report also places considerable emphasis on potential liability associated with falling palm skirts and notes that the Fire Department conducts annual training for these incidents. Public safety training is essential, but cities routinely prepare for many hazards without eliminating the amenities that create those risks. Palm Springs firefighters also train for search and rescue operations in the surrounding mountains, where emergency responses occur regularly and fatalities have occurred over the years. Yet the City has not closed hiking trails because of those risks. Likewise, despite pedestrian and bicycle fatalities in recent years, the City has not installed protected bicycle lanes or other infrastructure improvements on every roadway and they certainly have not banned bicycle riding. Instead, the City manages risk through targeted safety measures rather than eliminating the activity itself. Heritage palm trees deserve the same thoughtful, balanced approach rather than a citywide removal of every natural skirt.



We also believe the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires the City to carefully consider feasible alternatives that would substantially reduce environmental impacts while still achieving the project's public safety objectives. A blanket removal program is not the only option. The tree-by-tree management approach outlined below would allow the City to address legitimate safety concerns while minimizing impacts to wildlife habitat, the historic character of Palm Springs, and one of the largest collections of heritage California fan palms in their natural state.

Rather than adopting a blanket policy, we respectfully recommend that the City adopt the following tree-by-tree management approach:

- Convene a stakeholder working group consisting of representatives from wildlife organizations, environmental groups, preservation organizations, tourism and business interests, and One-PS, and direct the group to return to the Council within approximately three months with recommendations that better balance public safety, wildlife habitat, and preservation of Palm Springs' iconic landscape before considering any citywide blanket skirt removal program.
- Conduct an individual risk assessment for every tree before authorizing skirt removal. Prioritize evaluating trees located over sidewalks, playgrounds, schools, bus stops, outdoor dining areas, and other locations with significant pedestrian traffic.
- Evaluate the stability and condition of each skirt rather than assuming all skirts present the same level of risk.
- Leave skirts intact on palm trees located in parks, medians, open space, golf courses, and streets where pedestrian activity is minimal or non-existent.
- Recognize the ecological importance of native California fan palms and manage them differently from non-native Mexican fan palms whenever appropriate.
- Avoid trimming during the desert bird nesting season, generally February through September, except in cases that qualify as immediate public safety emergencies.
- Require an independent inspection by a qualified wildlife biologist or wildlife rehabilitation expert, such as the Desert Wildlife Center, before removing any skirt that may contain active bird nests, roosting bats, or other protected wildlife, and implement appropriate humane measures whenever wildlife is present (including rodent nests).
- Continue routine inspections and targeted maintenance for trees with documented safety concerns rather than implementing citywide removal.
- Install signs as needed.
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This balanced approach protects public safety while preserving the wildlife habitat, historic character, and natural beauty that define Palm Springs.



The question before the Council is not whether safety matters—it absolutely does. The question is whether permanently altering more than 2,150 heritage palm trees is the only reasonable solution. We believe the answer is no.

Palm Springs has earned an international reputation because it has embraced its unique desert landscape rather than trying to make it look like somewhere else-anywhere else. Once the natural skirts are removed from these heritage palms, they cannot simply be restored. The decision before you will permanently shape the appearance, wildlife habitat, and ecological character of Palm Springs for generations to come.

We respectfully ask you to reject the proposed blanket skirt removal program and instead establish a working committee and direct them to develop a balanced, tree-by-tree management plan that protects both public safety and one of Palm Springs' most treasured natural and cultural resources.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully,

Board of Directors, Oswit Land Trust

Jane Garrison
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ATTACHMENT:

An American Kestrel pair nesting in a California Fan Palm at Demuth Park on May 1, 2026. One kestrel was observed guarding the nest while the other was foraging for food.





