

La Quinta residents offer study, recommendations for fixing short-term rental problems

Group of homeowners calling themselves Neighbors for Neighborhoods hold press conference at City Hall



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Three-night minimum stays, extended moratorium on new permits and limited number of short-term rentals in residential neighborhoods are a few of the recommendations a group of La Quinta homeowners want the City Council to consider as it reviews its rules for vacation homes.

Standing in front of City Hall Tuesday morning, a group of about 20 homeowners from the cove, PGA West and other La Quinta communities, calling themselves “Neighbors for Neighborhoods” – or N4N – released a 100-page report, with survey and recommended solutions, to problems surrounding vacation rentals.

Short-term vacation rentals are “harming the spirit of community in ... the whole city,” said Jeff Smith, longtime resident of the cove. “Community spirit is an intangible force that binds a community together. Short-term vacation rental guests are not neighbors. They come here, they stay for a short time, they recreate and then they leave,” Smith said.

“They don’t know us, and we don’t know them. They’re invested in communities somewhere else,” he said.

Smith was among five speakers, as other attendees held signs that read: “Neighborhoods are for Neighbors Not Short-term Rentals” and “Save Our La Quinta Neighborhoods.”



The Neighbors for Neighborhoods citizens group was started in October by Don Shoffstall.

Shoffstall said 632 residents from 21 La Quinta communities “voluntarily” participated in the survey, which was conducted online. It followed the criteria of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Shoffstall said.

Based on the survey, N4N is proposing three types of short-term vacation rental permits:

- **Home share:** Where the property owner is on site throughout the rental; no minimum night stay.
- **Commercial short-term rental:** No minimum stay in homes created as vacation rentals such as Legacy and the planned SilverRock resort.
- **Residential short-term rental:** Minimum three-night stay to start and ultimately 28-night minimums phased in over three years. The report states that 48 of La Quinta’s HOAs already have amended their rules to require a minimum rental period of 30 days or more.

Other recommendations from the group are:

- **Extend the moratorium:** The survey indicates that 66% of the 632 surveyed want the moratorium on new permits, in place since August, extended until a new or amended ordinance is passed addressing short-term rental issues, such as noise.
- **Cap the number of short-term vacation rental permits:** The group recommends the city freeze issuing new short-term vacation rental permits until the ratio of vacation rentals to homes in La Quinta's residential zoned neighborhoods reaches 3%. The ratio is currently 5%, the report states, with 1,260 of 24,860 housing units permitted as short-term rentals.
- **Density limits:** Neighbors for Neighborhoods supports the city ad-hoc committee's recommendation for a 300-foot radius between vacation rental properties in residential areas.
- **Include HOAs:** The report states that 62% of the city's 1,260 permitted vacation rentals are within homeowners associations but should be included in the city's ordinance, knowing that the HOAs can set stricter rules, but can't under-regulate what the city requires.

The survey found that 67% of those responding listed noise as the top problem, followed by parking, inability to sleep, overcrowding or more occupants than allowed, trash, renters disrespectful of their full-time neighbors, trespassing and safety.

Twenty percent listed loss of friends and neighbors who moved to get away from short-term rentals as a primary problem.

La Quinta has a hotline people can call to lodge complaints against short-term rentals. The 24-hour service then forwards the complaints to the city's code compliance unit or the sheriff's department.

According to the survey, 27% said they have used the number, yet 76% of survey responders said they have had issues with short-term rentals.

Many don't lodge complaints because they feel by the time code enforcement or a deputy arrives, the issue will have been resolved and the caller could face a fine or backlash for false reporting, Shoffstall said.

Short-term vacation rentals are businesses, said cove resident Edie Hylton.

"There is no other business that requires as much government involvement and management," she said.

City staff and council members said they were not told of, or invited to, Tuesday's press conference.

Mayor Linda Evans said she couldn't comment on what was said in front of City Hall, but did receive a copy of the report last week. "I appreciate the work and effort" the group took to provide additional information that the council can weigh along with the ad hoc committee's recommendations.

"I want to thank them for actually doing it (the study) because this is exactly what we have been saying even post-ad hoc ... we want to hear from other people; we want to get all the input before we make decisions," Evans said.

"This information is valued and will absolutely be taken into consideration as we proceed with the discussions regarding any program changes," Evans said.

How we got here

La Quinta, like other cities in the Coachella Valley and elsewhere, has seen an increase in short-term rentals during the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought a 267% rise in complaints in La Quinta from May through July, prompting the moratorium.

For several months, City Council meetings have routinely included lengthy public comment sessions focused on short-term vacation rentals, even when it is not on the agenda. Most of the comments are from property owners who say they have never had problem renters and should the program be canceled, it would severely impact their incomes.

The city wants to strike a balance between short-term vacation rentals and full-time residents. Last year, the council appointed a 15-member ad hoc committee made up of people for and against short-term vacation rentals to study the issues and make recommendations for solutions.

The committee met monthly starting in March but also broke into subcommittees, many meeting weekly.

On Dec. 15, the council held a study session to review a report and recommendations from the ad hoc committee, which includes minimum two-night stays and establishing a radius of 300 feet between vacation rentals in residential neighborhoods.

The council took no action because it was a study session.

On Dec. 1, the council approved changes to its short-term vacation rental ordinance, which go into effect Jan. 15 which include:



- Hosting platforms, such as Airbnb, must verify property listings have an active short-term vacation rental permit with the city before booking rental transactions through their sites. If a permit is suspended or none is on record, the property cannot be rented.
- Short-term vacation rental permit renewal applications must be submitted no more than 60 and no later than 30 days before the permit expires; this would remove the current allowance for permits to be renewed up to 30 days after they expire.
- The person(s) listed as the local contact person for the rental property must be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week with the ability to respond to the location within 30 minutes of being called by code enforcement or the sheriff's department.
- Bedroom additions or conversions must be verified and approved by the city to ensure compliance with city codes; the short-term vacation rental permit will be reissued to reflect the approved number of bedrooms allowed; a permit will not be renewed if a short-term vacation rental host advertises the number of bedrooms inaccurately.
- Short-term vacation rental permit applications for properties within homeowners associations must submit a letter from the HOA stating that short-term vacation rentals are allowed in the community; permits will not be issued for communities that do not allow the short-term rentals.
- The city must be notified immediately upon a short-term vacation rental property ownership change, which will terminate the existing permit. The new owner will have to apply for a new short-term vacation rental permit, if that will be the continued use for the property.
- The council also set new fines, ranging \$1,000 to \$5,000 depending on the violation and if it is a repeated offense.

- **Special meeting planned**

- A special City Council meeting focused solely on short-term vacation rentals is scheduled for 5 p.m. Jan. 27 to further discuss the ad hoc committee's

recommendations. The Neighbors for Neighborhoods report also will be included in the agenda packet, City Manager Jon McMillen said.

- The city is also looking at raising the short-term rental permit fee, currently set at \$200 per year, which McMillen said.
- Staff is doing a fee study and will present its findings to the council in late February or March, McMillen said.
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