

Riverside County weighs new short-term rental rules, enforcement steps to address growing market



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Changes soon could be on the way to short-term rental regulations in unincorporated areas of Riverside County, including new requirements for property inspections and signage, as well as steeper penalties for violations of the county's rental ordinance.

The Riverside County Planning Commission discussed several changes during a meeting Wednesday, ultimately deciding to have the draft ordinance return to the commission in a subsequent meeting before deciding whether to advance the recommendations to the county's Board of Supervisors.

The draft ordinance was first posted by the county for public review in early March.

The proposed changes are partially in response to a Riverside County Civil Grand Jury report on the county's short-term rental landscape completed last year. That report found that the current enforcement process is ineffective, with fines too small to act as a meaningful deterrent, and also recommended mandating property inspections and increasing short-term rental initial licensing and renewal fees to fund better enforcement.

“The goal is to strike a fair and balanced ordinance that not only supports the industry, the business as a whole, but also gives us the teeth necessary to do the enforcement when there are bad operators,” John Hildebrand, the county's planning director, said during the meeting Wednesday. “It's critical we strike that balance.”

One of the more significant changes in the proposed ordinance is mandatory property inspections for people seeking a short-term rental certificate. The revised ordinance includes new infraction fees for those who violate the ordinance, along with what Hildebrand described as a “three-strikes-and-you're-out” process in which a short-term rental permit could be revoked after a third violation.

Hildebrand also noted other steps — such as the county entering into an agreement with compliance technology company Deckard Technologies to handle short-term rental applications and tax collections, establishing a 24/7 call center to handle issues related to rentals and hiring more code

enforcement officials to work over the weekends — as part of the county’s “holistic approach” to the process.

The changes are under consideration as unincorporated Riverside County has seen a substantial spike in its number of short-term rentals, which has increased from 268 in 2016 — when the county first adopted a short-term rental ordinance — to 567 in 2020, according to the grand jury report.

This year, the county has roughly 925 short-term vacation rentals, along with an estimated double to triple that amount operating without proper permits, according to a county staff report.

More than 30 residents testified during the commission’s meeting Wednesday, many coming from the Temecula area and Idyllwild and Pine Cove communities — where issues related to the rentals are concentrated.

Idyllwild, for example, has nearly half of all registered short-term rentals under county jurisdiction, with a 70% higher ratio of short-term rentals to residents than Palm Springs, according to a previous Desert Sun analysis of county, city and census data.

Although many residents who testified Wednesday were appreciative of the county’s steps to address the issues associated with the rentals, several raised concerns over specific provisions within the proposed draft.

One issue centered on a provision that would have increased the minimum number of days booked at a short-term rental to three days and two nights, up from two days and one night in the current ordinance, which Hildebrand explained as an effort to cut down on the frequency of overnight “party houses.”

But some residents, including several from the Temecula wine country area, argued the two-night minimum would not address the party house issue, and instead push visitors to skip an overnight stay altogether.

“Countless guests with children come from the OC, Los Angeles and San Diego area simply to be in a rural environment,” Natalie Moton, who operates a short-term rental in the wine country area. “These families coming from these areas typically can't come for two nights because on Saturdays, as most people know with children, they're filled with gymnastics, soccer practice, violin, piano or some other type of lesson.”

Ultimately, the commissioners were sympathetic to the arguments made by those in favor of keeping the one-night stays, as they opted to remove the provision increasing the minimum stay to two nights.

The number of people allowed to stay at a short-term rental was also a major point of discussion, as the draft ordinance would allow two people per bedroom plus an additional person, with a 10-person maximum. The ordinance also states “responsible operators” could increase the max occupancy to 16 by submitting an application and complying with building codes.

Idyllwild resident Peter Szabadi questioned what criteria would be used to grant an exception to the 10-person limit, describing it as “totally discretionary.”

“Just imagine living next to a 16-person capacity motel in a residentially zoned area,” Szabadi said. “The limit should remain (at) 10.”

The commissioners ultimately decided to leave the provision as proposed under the draft ordinance.

Still, others argued the ordinance revisions won’t address the root issue for many residents: unpermitted short-term vacation rentals, which county staff have estimated could account for twice or triple as many rental homes as those permitted in unincorporated Riverside County.

"You guys got this pretty far along at this stage ... but I think we've lost our way a little bit," said Richard Walker, who operates a rental in the Desert Hot Springs area. "I think the only thing to be talking about is enforcement and absolutely obliterating unpermitted STRs, because that's what this. People are pissing off neighbors, and that's what we want to stop from happening."

With the planning commission deciding to give further consideration to the ordinance at a subsequent meeting, the topic could return to the body during its meeting May 18 to make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors.

Previous reporting from The Desert Sun business reporter James B. Cutchin was used in this story.

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