

# San Bernardino County pauses new short-term rental permits in Joshua Tree, Big Bear City



**Erin Rode**

Palm Springs Desert Sun | *Published June 14, 2022*



New short-term rentals will be paused in AirBnb hotspot Joshua Tree and other high desert communities under a temporary urgency ordinance approved by the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

The ordinance applies to unincorporated communities in the mountain and desert regions of San Bernardino County, including Joshua Tree, Morongo Valley, Landers, Big Bear City and Wrightwood, among others.

The 45-day interim urgency ordinance takes effect immediately, and was brought forward by Supervisor Dawn Rowe, who represents the majority of the county's unincorporated mountain and desert communities.

Under the ordinance, the county will continue to accept and process applications for short-term rentals but no permits will be issued until after the 45 days. The pause on new permits does not apply to applications submitted before the ordinance took effect, or to applications to renew existing short-term rentals.

“Due, in part, to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism has increased dramatically in the mountain and desert regions of the County, resulting in a surge of new short-term residential rental listings and STR occupancy rates in unincorporated areas of the region. With the increase in occupancy rates, the community has expressed increased concern with the behavior of STR guests, including noise, parties, disruptive events, overoccupancy, parking problems, and safety issues,” the urgency ordinance states.

In addition to the temporary pause on new permits, the supervisors also approved several amendments to the county’s short-term rental ordinance. These changes include a limit of one STR on parcels under 2 acres and two STRs on parcels over 2 acres in the mountain and desert regions, and occupancy limits of four people for a one-bedroom or studio unit, with two additional guests allowed for each additional bedroom up to a maximum of 12 total guests.

The supervisors also capped the number of STR permits for any individual person, corporation, personal or family trust, LLC or LLP at two permits — those with more than two STRs will be grandfathered in to keep their existing rentals. Rowe also proposed banning corporations from obtaining an STR permit, but her motion did not move forward due to a lack of a second from other supervisors.

These changes to short-term rental rules will take effect July 28, 30 days after the ordinance is introduced on second reading on June 28. The temporary pause on new permits is intended to allow the county time to implement the new rules and study other options on STRs.

“While the Proposed STR Amendments address a number of concerns identified by the community, the board finds that in order to protect the public health, safety and welfare this interim urgency ordinance is necessary to provide the county additional time, in which it intends to study zoning proposals to increase enforcement efforts, hire additional code enforcement staff, study enforcement activities and zoning proposals of other jurisdictions, and implement the updated proposed STR amendments considered on June 14, 2022,” the urgency ordinance states.

Rowe said she hopes that staff could spend the 45 days examining the county's capacity for code enforcement on short-term rental, and potentially bring back a consideration of using an external company to do more proactive enforcement.

County staff also outlined several potential future options on short-term rentals that could be brought before the Planning Commission and then the Board of Supervisors at a later date, including a ban on evicting long-term tenants for the purposes of establishing a short-term rental, capping the number of allowed short-term rentals, and expanding the county's STR ordinance to also apply to the valley region, which includes Inland Empire cities like San Bernardino and Ontario.



### **About 20% of Joshua Tree homes are STRs**

High desert residents have argued that the short-term rentals have taken over places that previously served as long-term housing for locals, causing a dearth of available rental units and contributing to rising housing costs.

Merillee Kuchon, who described herself as a restaurant owner in the Joshua Tree area, said that since opening in 2020 "every month we lose at least one employee who was forced to move away" because they couldn't afford to live in the area.

"Use this reprieve to study the housing crisis. We need long-term affordable housing for locals, we need solutions," she said.

Meanwhile, STR owners say short-term rentals support the region's tourism-driven economy, and that the market will naturally reach a saturation point on

its own, leveling out the number of STRs. Some argue that the market has already reached this point, after coronavirus-related travel restrictions resulted in more Southern California residents visiting local destinations like Big Bear and Joshua Tree.

Jennifer Gladys, founder of short-term rental company Cocoon, said that she doesn't support the pause, and that some short-term rental owners are already beginning to drop out of the market as their properties don't earn as much as they expected.

"But I wouldn't count on this area being affordable housing," said Gladys, noting that outsiders could continue to buy homes in Joshua Tree even with the pause. "In order to solve the housing issue, let the short-term rental market correct itself and focus on more effective solutions for affordable housing."

As of early March, approximately 20% of unincorporated Joshua Tree's housing units were permitted as STRs. As of the 2020 Census, the community has 3,745 housing units, including both single-family homes and multi-family units, and the community had 780 active STR permits as of early March. Residents argue the number of short-term rentals is actually much higher due to the number of unpermitted STRs.

AirDNA, a third-party that tracks data on short-term rentals, currently counts 1,231 active short-term rental listings in Joshua Tree, with 96% of those offering the rental of an entire home.

As of Feb. 24, there were 3,332 permits for short-term rentals in unincorporated communities in the mountain region, and 1,339 in the desert region, but those numbers fluctuate daily; the county typically receives between 10 and 30 new applications each day.

In recent years, the high desert area has seen increased visitors but declining residents — attendance at Joshua Tree National Park has more than doubled in the past seven years, from 1.3 million visitors in 2014 to nearly 3.1 million in 2021.

Meanwhile, the 2020 census counted 6,489 people in Joshua Tree, a 12.5% drop from 7,414 residents in 2010. And while some contend Joshua Tree has always been a haven for second homes, the percent of vacant units — a category that counts housing units that aren't used as a primary residence, including short-term rentals — increased by 33.6% between 2010 and 2020.

As short-term rentals have boomed in Joshua Tree, housing prices have risen faster in the high desert than in other parts of the state. An analysis by the San Francisco Chronicle of home value data from Zillow found the three California ZIP codes with the largest increases in home values during the pandemic were all in the high desert. Landers took first place, with an 84% increase, followed by Joshua Tree with a 69% increase, and Twentynine Palms with 63%

increase. A typical home value in Joshua Tree is now \$414,172, up from \$244,942 before the pandemic.

While short-term rentals in unincorporated communities are regulated by San Bernardino County, incorporated cities in the high desert, like Yucca Valley and Twentynine Palms, make their own short-term rental rules. Both cities have placed caps on short-term rentals in the past few months.

In February, Yucca Valley capped the number of STRs at 10% of the town's single-family housing units, and last month, Twentynine Palms capped its short-term rentals at 500, or about 8.6% of the city's single-family housing stock.

*Erin Rode covers the environment for the Desert Sun. Reach her at [erin.rode@desertsun.com](mailto:erin.rode@desertsun.com) or on Twitter at [@RodeErin](https://twitter.com/RodeErin).*