



# Short offseason stuns LeBron after winning NBA title

SPORTS, 1B

# The Desert Sun

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This land near Pierson Boulevard and Miracle Hill Road in Desert Hot Springs is planned to be the future site of artist Kenny Irwin's Robolights display. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

## No Robolights in 2020; site still in development

\$1.5 million needed to start work, event's business official says; fundraising ongoing

**Brian Blueskye**  
Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

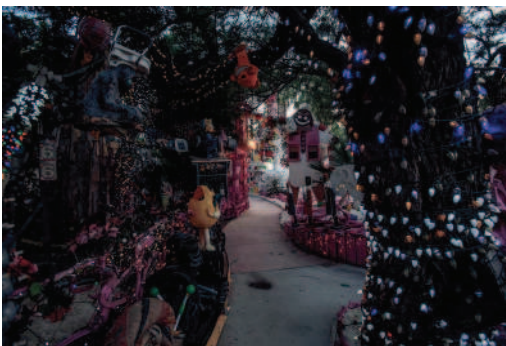
Robolights, the quirky and contentious holiday light display in the California desert, will not happen in its new Desert Hot Springs location this year.

The cost to begin development is estimated at \$1.5 million, including \$300,000 for the first phase of planning, according to Robolights director of business development and sales Brittany Sorrentino. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, fundraising efforts are "accelerating" but there is no projected opening date at this time, she said.

"The focus is fundraising for the project in order to pay for the initial phase, which will include city permits and working with a local planning and engineering firm, The Altum Group," Sorrentino said.

Irwin paid \$350,000 for the properties last year, Sorrentino previously told The Desert Sun, and hoped to start developing the site in November 2019. At present, the land is home to an abandoned structure and the road leading up to it is blocked to the public.

Irwin deferred all questions from The



The 2018 Robolights display at artist Kenny Irwin's Palm Springs home.

RICHARD LUI/THE DESERT SUN

Desert Sun to Sorrentino.

The holiday light display, previously staged at Irwin's home on Granvia Valmonte in Palm Springs, had been open to the public for more than 30 years. But it became the subject of litigation regarding neighbor complaints about trash, crowds and traffic.

Irwin and the City of Palm Springs reached an agreement in November 2018, ending a two-year legal fight. Irwin agreed to move the exhibit to a commercial location, and the city agreed to provide \$125,000 to help cover the move.

The psychedelic collection of scrap items transformed into massive displays under

See **ROBOLIGHTS**, Page 2A

### CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

## Sheriff and critics spar over order

Bianco said forceful rules not best way to enforce protocols

**Colin Atagi and Nicole Hayden**

Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco sparred with critics in a series of tweets over the weekend as he doubled down on his opposition to Gov. Gavin Newsom's orders for people to stay home to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Bianco's tweets came in response to people chastising him after he posted a video statement Friday decrying Newsom's plans to impose shutdowns across the state and repeating his objection to penalizing those who don't follow the new protocols. Bianco's tweets also drew praise from others thanking him for not bowing down to the orders.

In an interview with The Desert Sun, Bianco said forceful rules are not the best way to enforce state-mandated safety protocols.

"Honesty and appealing to them to do the right things," Bianco said, is the best way to get the public to comply with state aims.

Bianco added that he doesn't believe enforcement is necessary as he believes most people follow the rules such as masking and social distancing at grocery stores and in other public places.

See **SHERIFF**, Page 6A



"Honesty and appealing to them to do the right things," Sheriff Chad Bianco said, is the best way to get the public to comply. THE DESERT SUN

## Riverside County virus cases exceed 100,000

**Nicole Hayden, Melissa Daniels and Larry Bohannan**

Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

California authorities sent a cellphone text alert Tuesday to two major regions of the nation's most populous state to tell millions that the coronavirus is spreading rapidly and asking them to stay home except for essential activities.

The noon blast to the state-designated 11-county Southern California region and 12-county San Joaquin Valley region was sent by the state Office of Emergency Services.

The text also urged people to wear masks and physically distance.

Both regions came under increased restrictions this week after the capacity of hospital intensive care units dropped below 15%. The restrictions will remain in effect for at least three weeks and require reduced capacity at essential businesses as a surge of new coronavirus cases threatens to overwhelm hospitals.

Dropping to so few available beds is concerning for local hospital systems as COVID-19 cases are predicted to continue to increase. The two regions join several counties in the San Francisco Bay Area, which implemented similar stay-at-home orders without waiting to cross into the threshold that would require action by the state.

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## Free PPE for businesses

Local small businesses can get equipped with free personal protective equipment under a new program from the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership. TAYA GRAY/THE DESERT SUN

### USA TODAY

## Coronavirus vaccine makes debut in the UK

The United Kingdom on Tuesday became the first Western country to start vaccinating its population against a virus that has killed more than 1.5 million people worldwide. In a landmark moment in the coronavirus pandemic, around 50 hospitals in the U.K.'s state-run National Health Service started administering the COVID-19 inoculation. **Story, 7A**

## Protesting shutdowns

El Paseo business owner Denise Robergé is organizing a protest of the recent temporary closure of in-restaurant dining, salons and other businesses by the state this week. **3A**

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# COACHELLA VALLEY

## Free PPE on its way to desert cities for local businesses

**Melissa Daniels**  
Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Local small businesses can get equipped with free personal protective equipment under a new program from the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership.

The “Million Mask Giveaway” will dole out more than 1.4 million face masks, 96,000 bottles of hand sanitizer and 40,000 face shields to small businesses in all nine cities, plus the Joshua Tree Gateway Communities and growers and farmworkers in the region.

The supplies, at an estimated value of more than \$1 million, came after a request to the California Office of Emergency Services.

Joe Wallace, CEO and chief innovation officer of CVEP, said the costs of masks and hand sanitizer can add up quickly for small businesses at a time when they’re already hurting.

“This initiative means businesses do not have to worry about spending their own money on PPE,” Wallace said. “By partnering with all nine cities, it demonstrates what we can do when we work together as a region.”

Each city’s supply will be based on the number and types of businesses in that city. Then, it will be up to the cities to distribute the masks, hand sanitizer and face shields through December, with processes for the farmworker distribution still to be determined.

CVEP was one of three groups statewide to directly ask OES for supplies. The organization reached out in November after hearing of a similar effort in Fresno in anticipation of a need for supplies.

But local governments have also



**Staff from the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership unload a supply of personal protective equipment in preparation for distribution to Coachella Valley small businesses earlier this month.**

COURTESY OF COACHELLA VALLEY ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

been getting the help: As of Dec. 6, Riverside County had received more than 2.8 million N-95 respirators, 13.2 million procedure masks, 180,000 gowns, 99,288 face shields, and 4.2 million gloves from OES. That’s the seventh most PPE of any county in the state, though Riverside County has the fourth-largest population with more than 2.4 million residents.

The PPE will be doled out at a time when the number of coronavirus cases is surging locally and intensive care unit beds are filling up; the state’s most recent stay-at-home order kicked in for

more than 22 million residents in the Southern California region after available ICU capacity dropped below 15%.

In the 11-county region that the state calls Southern California, there was 10.9% available ICU bed capacity as of Monday.

The stay-at-home order limits retail capacity to 20 and restaurants to take-out or delivery only, prohibits personal care services, and limits church services to outdoors only. Californians are urged to stay home except for essential

See PPE, Page 8A

## Business owner organizing protest

**Sherry Barkas**  
Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

El Paseo business owner Denise Robergé is organizing a protest of the recent temporary closure of in-restaurant dining, salons and other businesses by the state this week, triggered when Southern California’s hospital ICU capacity, including Riverside County, fell to 10.3%.

The state announced last week that regions with ICU capacity under 15%, must adhere to a stay-at-home order for at least three weeks to help slow the spread of COVID-19, as positive cases continue to rise.

Robergé’s protest, announced on Facebook, is planned for 3 p.m. Wednesday. Robergé has also invited businesses to an organizational meeting at 4 p.m. Tuesday at her store, at 73995 El Paseo.

“This is not political, it is a protest to the shutdown,” Robergé told The Desert Sun on Tuesday. Robergé is known for decorating her storefront windows with controversial political statements.

Under the stay-at-home order, residents are prohibited from gathering and asked to stay home except for essential activities.

The state also recommends that “those exercising their right to engage in political expression (including, for example, their right to petition the government) should utilize alternative channels, such as the many online and

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# Protest

Continued from Page 3A

broadcasting platforms available in the digital age, in place of in-person gatherings.”

Robergé pointed to Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco’s announcement that he would not enforce the state’s orders to stay home “except for essential activity.”

Palm Desert is one of five Coachella Valley cities that contracts with the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department for law enforcement services.

Palm Desert is supportive of the state’s recommendation and encourages everyone to keep public health and safety top of mind when exercising political expression, city spokesman David Hermann said.

“Recognizing that it is a recommendation and not an order, we do not anticipate any enforcement in connection with the lawful exercise of free speech in Palm Desert,” Hermann said.

On her Facebook page, Robergé posted the following on Monday:

“OK ENOUGH....IS ENOUGH  
“Where the hell are our city leaders to tell the restaurants and the rest of us essential works (everyone) to stay OPEN....WE have a brave Sheriff who has stated that he will not be a part of this shut down time to STAND UP IF YOU WANT TO FIGHT BACK CALL MY STORE 760-340-5045 let’s all meet on TUESDAY DEC 8 2020 @ 4 pm Share to all business owners just a meeting to organize the protest PROTEST IS ON WEDNESDAY DEC 9TH AT 3:00 73995 El Paseo.”

Since the outset of the pandemic, the Palm Desert has been complying with state and county public health orders, Hermann said.

“We are not currently contemplating any changes to that policy,” he said.

“In our community, the vast majority of residents and businesses follow these orders,” Hermann said. “When issues arise, we first try to gain voluntary compliance via education. Our helpful staff reaches out to the relevant parties and informs them of the orders and discusses potential solutions.”

Ray Rodriguez, owner of Casuelas Café and the Cork Tree restaurants in Palm Desert, said he had heard about Robergé’s planned protest and organizational meeting, but didn’t plan to attend. “As far as civil disobedience and opening, that’s pretty naïve. That



**El Paseo business owner Denise Robergé is organizing a protest of the recent temporary closure of in-restaurant dining, salons and other businesses by the state this week.** JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

would likely negate insurance policies and put you on the wrong end of any legal action if you were open and something bad happened,” Rodriguez said.

The current rise in COVID-19 cases, Rodriguez said, had been predicted by health officials and temporary closures may be “unwelcomed, but not unexpected. I was grateful to get past Thanksgiving, that felt like a bonus to me.”

There is a light at the end of the tunnel, Rodriguez said.

Reopening against the state and county mandates could be costly, he said, adding that his customers and the community continue to support his restaurants, ordering takeout and delivery.

While the sheriff may not enforce state guidelines, he said, the health department and Alcoholic Beverage Control – ABC – do and can pull a restaurant’s licenses if operating illegally.

“When you start drawing outside the lines, the system is not going to support you,” Rodriguez said.

If a business chooses to operate in violation of public health orders, the city forwards the information to the Riverside County Counsel and County Public Health Officer, he said.

Complaints are evaluated and prioritized by the level of risk they pose to public health. The county counsel then decides how best to proceed with voluntary compliance still being the primary goal, Hermann explained.

Possible enforcement tools include: cease and desist letters; suspension or revocation of permits and licenses, reporting of violations to the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Con-

trol and Cal/OSHA, and more, he said.

Riverside County was in the “purple tier” already, the strictest for reopening businesses, which required restaurants to close dining rooms and only offer outdoor eating, takeout or delivery service.

Newsom unveiled his latest plan for slowing the spread of COVID-19 last week, which divides the state into five regions – the Bay Area; Greater Sacramento; Northern California; San Joaquin Valley; and Southern California.

The So Cal region is home to 22 million people and includes the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Imperial, Inyo, Mono, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura and Riverside.

The stay-at-home orders followed weeks of rapid increases in new COVID-19 cases across California, and a rise in virus-related hospitalizations which could triple by Christmas, Newsom said. “This is not a permanent state,” Newsom said, adding this is the “final surge of the pandemic.”

On Tuesday morning, Robergé told The Desert Sun she envisions a protest on the street and one that could also see restaurants and other shuttered businesses reopening against state mandates but will know more following the organizational meeting. She didn’t know how many might be participate Wednesday, but said, “I hope it’s huge.”

Anyone interested in participating on Wednesday can call Robergé at (760) 340-5045 for more information.

*Previous reporting by Desert Sun reporters Melissa Daniels and Nicole Hayden was used in this report.*

# PPE

Continued from Page 3A

reasons, but many commercial and industrial operations are still up and running.

While about 37% of people around the U.S. work from home, in the Coachella Valley, roughly 31% of the workforce is remote. That means the majority of the workforce in the area is still heading out to work.

CVEP found in October that in two of the valley’s top four employment sectors – “food preparation and serving related” jobs and “building grounds cleaning and maintenance jobs,” 0% of workers can work from home.

Dr. Mark Ghaly, California’s health and human services secretary, said at a news conference Tuesday that essential workplaces, in general, are facing an increased risk of transmission as case numbers climb. “Because we are experiencing widespread transmission, then all activities that were maybe lower risk a month ago, today are higher risk, and that includes our essential workplaces,” Ghaly said.

Those who work indoors are facing more risk from a transmission standpoint, too; Ghaly said fresh circulating air reduces the risk.

Abby Browning, chief of the office of Private Sector and non-governmental organization coordination at OES, said partnering with the private sector helps keep workers safe.

As of Dec. 7, the state’s PPE stockpile included:

- 178.7 million N95 respirators
- 339 million surgical masks
- 63.8 million procedure gowns
- 19.5 million face shields
- 152.2 million sets of protective gloves



**Coachella Valley Economic Partnership Director of Economic Development Agustin Aragon holds a box of face masks inside the CVEP warehouse on Tuesday.** TAYA GRAY/THE DESERT SUN

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