

# YOUR VOICE

## Help people find proper housing



**Your Turn**  
Jeanette Amaya Gonzales and Jesus Garcia  
Guest columnists

While many people may be aware of the water problems at the Oasis Mobile Home Park in the eastern Coachella Valley, there are issues that are much larger and more egregious than just contaminated water.

In our decade living in Oasis, we have had to deal with trash build-up, power and water outages, flooding, lack of safe roads, and retaliation from the park owner, such as increasing rent, for speaking up on these matters. We now believe there is no longer the possibility for a healthy community here. This highlights a pressing problem for housing and dignity for residents like us in California.

Conditions have never seemed to improve in Oasis. In some ways, they have gotten worse over the years. Our rent was raised when we first heard about the arsenic issues from the Environmental Protection Agency in 2019.

Without proper housing, how can we heed health measures during a global pandemic? COVID-19 has taught us that issues are more interconnected than we might think. For that reason, it's imperative that action be taken to relocate the residents from the Oasis Mobile Home Park and get families like ours to a safer



**A resident of Oasis Mobile Home Park opens his shower faucet to gather water for cooking. The park was cited by the Environmental Protection Agency for having dangerous levels of arsenic.** OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

place.

We have pleaded to anyone who would hear about our issues, but have been told time and time again that there was little that could be done to help. Hope has slowly run out in the mobile home park.

Some people think fixing our water system will fix the issues in Oasis, but they are gravely mistaken.

Simply fixing the water system will not make up for the housing injustices residents have had to put up with for years. It would only enrich an owner who

has long ignored the plight of residents. That's why in January, we decided to sue the owner of the mobile home park.

The only solution we believe will truly correct the decades of disinvestment, invisibility, and injustice for Oasis residents is relocation of all of us to safer, sanitary and dignified housing.

We've asked the state to support our relocation by allocating \$30 million from the state's budget to construct new housing and begin addressing this important issue to families like ours in the Coachella Valley. We are also asking lo-

cal, state and federal leaders to stand with us in this effort and to show that this injustice cannot continue.

Stepping up would set an example of California that there is still a true dedication to helping people rise no matter their wealth or region, as our governor aptly put it during his campaign. There are many Oasis parks in California. We have decided to shine light on housing abuses that we've endured so it can be fixed for others, too.

The only reason we live in a park like Oasis is because we have no other options. There is not enough affordable housing in the Eastern Coachella Valley. Indeed, Oasis never felt like a choice because we were forced here by the housing instability in the region. When we have looked for other housing, we have had little luck finding anything affordable, with a one-bedroom alone costing a minimum of \$1,400.

We need better housing and a safe community. For that to happen, we need relocation. California cannot be a place where we are forced to subsidize landlords who ignore their residents.

Our children deserve the same opportunities that so many others in this state have. It is up to those elected to serve to show up for us.

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## Accelerate the economy of Coachella Valley



**Your Turn**  
Joe Wallace  
Guest columnist

Roughly 10 years ago, the Cities of Palm Springs, Cathedral City and Desert Hot Springs came together to embrace the promise of diversifying the local economy through entrepreneurship in business sectors that pay a thriving wage and employ highly skilled technical professionals. The vision for the California iHub program was literally crafted in the Palm Springs City Hall. There are now 16 iHubs across the state. The Palm Springs iHub has consistently been ranked at or near the top by California GoBiz.

CVPE operates iHubs in Palm Springs, Palm Desert and Indio. The pandemic illuminated the need to diversify the local economy. The vision that started in Palm Springs gave us a head start on communities that did not put

entrepreneurship into their plans. CVPE took that vision and has established one of the most developed innovation ecosystems in the Inland Empire and was recently recognized for that in a white paper by the University of California Riverside's Center for Social Innovation.

Perseverance and diligence have put the Greater Palm Springs region in a strong position to innovate. The time is now to double down on diversification, innovation and equity. The enviable position we are in is the culmination of sticking to a noble vision through good, bad and a pandemic. Let us take advantage of the pandemic of the century to leverage our vision into the opportunity of the century.

Last March, CVPE expanded our focus to include assisting local businesses to gain access to relief programs offered by the SBA, California, Riverside County and our cities. We also benefitted from these programs and would like to commend the SBA, the SBDC, and the State of California for the assistance that helped us make it through the year and

ready to face the future. We were fortunate to secure nearly \$3 million worth of PPE from the State of California to distribute to Coachella Valley businesses through our partnerships with all nine cities and the chambers of commerce. We are very proud to have been able to deliver direct value that is more than double our annual budget at a critical time.

Prior to the pandemic, CVPE issued the first of a series of white papers on solutions to the important regional issues facing the Coachella Valley. That first paper was to address the need for a comprehensive university so that the workforce of our future can complete college without leaving home. We then partnered with the City of Palm Desert and the Greater Palm Springs CVB to form Priority One Coachella Valley to pursue an expansion of the CSU Palm Desert Campus. We are optimistic that something great will happen because of these efforts.

CVPE's scholarly approach attracted more interest and we have now expand-

ed into serving as a catalyst with CVAG and SCAG to promote a digital backbone in the Coachella Valley to close the digital divide and make telecommuting possible for people who want to enjoy our beautiful valley as home while working remotely.

It was a pleasure to form CVERT (Coachella Valley Economic Recovery Team) and to serve on the Riverside County Economic Recovery Task Force and the Palm Springs Economic Development and Business Retention Task Force.

These efforts have been impactful and will continue to be. What was most important was working together as a region for the good of all. This regional collaboration is how to make big things happen. The vision that started in Palm Springs has culminated into a group of dedicated people poised for prosperity. Let's all continue to actualize that vision.

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## Trump-era water rules should be reversed quickly

**Your Turn**  
Cathy Wagner and Brandon Dawson  
Guest columnists

On the way out the door, the Trump administration committed many environmental and financial scandals. One can cost low-income water users while lining the pockets of one of California's largest and most powerful water districts.

The focus of one scandal was the failure of the Trump administration to collect required fish and wildlife mitigation costs set out in the Central Valley Project Improvement Act. Passed by Congress in 1992, it established new financing rules.

First, it made environmental restoration a reimbursable purpose of the CVP. Second, it mandated a comprehensive suite of environmental restoration actions. Third, it required the water contractors, not the taxpayers, to pay for restoration as their cost of doing business.

Among other things, the law included a fishery restoration mandate for the Hoopa Tribe, whose fishery on the Trinity River had been nearly decimated by irrigators' exports and other water diversions. It also included mitigations for fishery resources and wildlife refuges throughout the Central Valley.

Significantly, the law specified that water contractors, not taxpayers, would pay for restoration and maintenance of the fishery and wildlife refuge damages.



**Houseboats float in the drought-lowered waters of Oroville Lake near Oroville in 2014.** RICH PEDRONCELLI/AP

After a very long fight leading up to 1992, the Hoopa, fishing groups and conservationists thought we had won.

Then-President Donald Trump entered the picture.

He brought into his administration a raft of appointees and advisers who were focused on derailing anything that required big water users to follow the spirit and content of the law. These folks, led by then-Secretary of Interior David Bernhardt, rewrote the Central Valley Project water financing rules to override environmental protections

guaranteed by the law.

These new rules, through new water contracts, would shift millions of dollars in environmental restoration costs from water contractors to U.S. taxpayers.

For example, roughly twice the amount of water used by Los Angeles in a year would be allocated to Westlands Water District – Bernhardt's old client. That water district is now free to charge exorbitant water rates to low-income communities within their reach, including El Porvenir and Cantua Creek.

If the rules are allowed to stand,

Westlands will be allowed to charge these residents for water that they cannot safely use to bathe in or drink. Meanwhile, Westlands will pocket millions in taxpayer subsidies.

Two elected officials can put an end to this Westlands deal: Gov. Gavin Newsom and President Joe Biden.

The Biden administration has the ability to roll back the Trump administration abuses of water law. It can do that by rescinding the bad rules and bad water contracts. Then the president can call on his new Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland to collect the more than \$400 million dollars owed by water contractors to the taxpayers to abide by the law's requirements.

The Newsom administration has the ability to press the Biden administration to take these important steps. The president will want some signal from the recall-threatened governor that such a move is welcome.

Will Newsom have the will to act? So far, the governor has been reluctant to challenge Westlands' ambition. But this time, it's clear that Californians will lose if the rules from the Trump administration stand.

Gov. Newsom, we're looking to you to help right this wrong.

Cathy Wagner has also written about improving the air quality in the Central Valley. Brandon Dawson has also written about priorities for California's next drought and the need for a sense of urgency for the crises at the Salton Sea.