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# The Desert Sun

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2023 | DESERTSUN.COM

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## Sign of the times



The Rancho Super Car Wash sign is seen along Highway 111 in Rancho Mirage on Thursday. The landmark, originally installed in 1966, was designated as a historic resource by the city this week.

PHOTOS BY ANDY ABEYTA/THE DESERT SUN

### Famed pink elephant car wash sign gets historic recognition

Tom Coulter Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

One of the Coachella Valley’s most prominent landmarks along Highway 111 — the large pink elephant sign promoting a Rancho Mirage car wash — was designated as a historic resource by the city this week.

- The neon sign, which promotes the Rancho Super Car Wash with a pink elephant spraying water from its trunk, was installed in 1966 — seven years before the city incorporated. Its design by Beatrice Haverfield was based on similar car wash signs she made for a company in Seattle.

With its designation as a historic resource, the car wash sign could still be altered or demolished, but any proposed changes would be subject to a more stringent review process at city hall. The city also has the right to relocate any historic property “as an alternative to granting the owner a demolition permit,” per Rancho Mirage municipal code.

The sign was included in the city’s 2003 historic resources survey, and the car wash’s current owners, Randy and Lorraine Barnes, applied for the designation earlier this year. The city has 73 other structures, largely mid-century modern homes designed by high-profile architects, already designated as historic resources.

The council’s vote for the designation Thursday coincided with an announcement from Preservation Mirage that the group plans to fully restore the sign in the coming months, in part thanks to a \$5,000 donation from an unidentified homeowner.

“This is all about the preservation of significant sites in Rancho Mirage,” Dan Allen, the preservation group’s president, said in the announcement. “Our group’s founder, Melissa Riche, has long advocated for this project as a very visible symbol of the need to protect a beloved part of Rancho Mirage life.”

Preservation Mirage also noted the two pink elephant signs that remain in Seattle were designated as historic landmarks last

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The Rancho Super Car Wash sign depicts a pink elephant spraying water from its trunk.

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Dan Allen  
Preservation Mirage president



Oasis Mobile Home Park was cited by the Environmental Protection Agency as having dangerous levels of arsenic in the water provided to the residents of the park.

OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

## Dozens move into unsafe Oasis Mobile Home Park

### Relocation efforts struggle as new residents stream in

Erin Rode  
Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

In a sign of how dire the Coachella Valley’s affordable housing shortage is, new residents are continuing to stream into an east valley mobile home park with tainted drinking water and myriad other health and safety issues, and county officials have been unable to stop them from moving in.

County officials have spent the past few years working to relocate residents from Oasis Mobile Home Park in Thermal, utilizing a \$30 million grant of state funding secured in the state budget by Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia in 2021. But officials have struggled to quell the issue of new residents moving in, creating a cycle of new families moving into the mobile home park with arsenic-contaminated water as soon as previous residents are relocated.

Riverside County issued a cease-and-desist letter this week “demanding that the operators of Oasis Mobile Home Park and anyone working on their behalf immediately cease and desist accepting new tenants and occupants at Oasis Mobile Home Park,” according to Supervisor V. Manuel Perez’s office. Perez represents Riverside County’s Fourth District, which includes Thermal.

“We are aggressively relocating individuals, but the frustration we’re having is that park owners are letting new people move in. And so it’s defeating the entire intent and purpose of relocating the residents

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## WOMEN OF THE YEAR



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# Sign

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year. The larger sign was donated to the Seattle Museum of History and Industry’s neon collection, while Amazon restored the smaller sign and placed it near its headquarters.

While the pink elephant has long been a fixture in the Coachella Valley, it also got some international exposure at this year’s Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, when Puerto Rican star Bad Bunny featured the sign on stage during his headlining performance that was live-streamed globally.

Unlike the real sign, however, the pink elephant at Coachella did not last long: The headliner’s performance of the song “Safaera” ended with the backdrop, including the image of the neon sign, being engulfed in (digital, not real) flames.

*Tom Coulter covers the cities of Palm Desert, La Quinta, Rancho Mirage and Indian Wells. Reach him at [thomas.coulter@desertsun.com](mailto:thomas.coulter@desertsun.com).*

## TODAY IN HISTORY

Today is Sunday, Sept. 10, the 253rd day of 2023. There are 112 days left in the year. On this date in:

**1608:** John Smith was elected president of the Jamestown colony council in Virginia.

**1813:** An American naval force commanded by Oliver H. Perry defeated the British in the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812. Afterward, Perry sent the message, “We have met the enemy and they are ours.”

**1846:** Elias Howe received a patent for his sewing machine.

**1960:** Hurricane Donna, a dangerous Category 4 storm eventually blamed for 364 deaths, struck the Florida Keys.

**1962:** The U.S. Supreme Court ordered the University of Mississippi to admit James Meredith, a Black student.

**1963:** Twenty Black students entered Alabama public schools following a standoff between federal authorities and Gov. George C. Wallace.

**1991:** The Senate Judiciary Committee opened hearings on the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court. The proceedings would become a watershed moment in the discussion of sexual harassment when Anita Hill, a law professor who had previously worked under Thomas, came forward with allegations against him.

**1998:** President Bill Clinton met with members of his Cabinet to apologize, ask forgiveness and promise to improve as a person in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

**2016:** John Hinckley Jr., the man who tried to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1981, was released from a Washington mental hospital for good. (Hinckley would be freed from all court oversight in June 2022.)

## CALIFORNIA LOTTERY

| Mega Millions/Friday   |               |
|--|---------------|
| Numbers  | 3,12,17,51,62 |
| Megamember   | 1             |
| Jackpot  | \$122 million |
| SuperLotto Plus/Saturday   |               |
| Saturday’s draw occurred past press time. Look for Saturday’s numbers in the Monday paper.                                       |               |
| Powerball/Saturday   |               |
| Saturday’s draw occurred past press time. Look for Saturday’s numbers in the Monday paper.                                       |               |
| Lottery information: Riverside offices: (800) 568-8379<br>On the Web: <a href="http://www.calottery.com">www.calottery.com</a> . |               |

# Unsafe

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from horrible living conditions,” said Greg Rodriguez, the county’s deputy director of government affairs and community engagement.

In the past three years, the county has helped relocate 74 families from the park, which had 241 occupied spaces when the county first became involved with the relocation process. A total of 62 mobile homes have been demolished, but 23 mobile homes have been brought into the vacated spaces.

Currently, about 202 of the park’s 346 total spaces are occupied, meaning about 35 new families have moved into the park.

The county’s goal is to ultimately close the park. Back in January, the county announced it would install physical barriers to prevent new tenants from moving in. But that never happened, according to Rodriguez.

“As we studied that a little bit more, the cost was extremely expensive. And we don’t want to utilize that \$30 million for barriers, we wanted to utilize that for residents to relocate,” said Rodriguez, who added that the county didn’t get a quote or estimate for the barriers, but “went off internal knowledge of the costliness of such measures.”

About two months ago, the county put up a few large signs warning that people aren’t allowed to move new mobile home units into the park, which has contributed to a downturn in the number of mobile homes moved in, according to Rodriguez. The county is also in “the final stage of negotiations” with a vendor who would immediately demolish mobile homes as soon as a family is relocated. Rodriguez says that this has been the bigger issue - new people moving into abandoned mobile homes, rather than new mobile home units being moved in.

Rodriguez says the county has tried communicating to the park’s owners that they need to stop allowing new people to move in, and have also pointed out code enforcement issues in the park, but “that’s falling on deaf ears.”

## Who owns Oasis Mobile Home Park?

Enforcement issues at the park are complicated by the fact that it sits on the Torres Martinez reservation and includes both “fee” and “trust” land. Fee lands constitute parcels of land within a tribal reservation’s boundaries that are not owned by the tribe or tribal members — in other words, privately owned reservation land within the county’s land-use jurisdiction. A total of 88 occupied parcels in the park are on fee land, and another 114 are on trust lands, with current trust ownership of the land held by the estate of Scott Lawson and four members of the Lawson family. Lawson, the longtime park operator, died in 2021.

The cease-and-desist order would technically apply to the fee lands, according to Rodriguez, and the county is hoping that park owners also will stop allowing people to move onto trust lands. The county is also in continued talks with the federal government on options to stop people from moving onto trust lands.

## Why is it unsafe to live there?

The park has been plagued for years with unsafe drinking water, receiving multiple emergency drinking water orders from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency since August 2019. In September 2021, the EPA issued its third emergency drinking water order to Oasis Mobile Home Park, requiring management to provide alternative drinking water to residents, reduce the levels of arsenic in the Oasis drinking water distribution system and monitor the water for contamination.

This August, the EPA sued the operator of Thermal’s Oasis Mobile Home Park, alleging it has failed for years to maintain safe drinking and waste water systems for as many as 1,500 residents. The civil complaint asks a federal judge to order the park’s management to address the unsafe conditions, comply

with the federal Safe Drinking Water Act and pay a penalty whose amount hasn’t been determined.

## How Riverside County is trying to relocate residents

Meanwhile, efforts continue to relocate residents from the park. In April, Riverside County supervisors dedicated \$15 million from the \$30 million pot of state funding to the new Oasis Housing Opportunity Program, which will provide qualifying residents with funds to move out of the mobile home park. That allocation marked the third time the board of supervisors has drawn from the state funds available for relocation. Previously, the board approved \$7 million to advance the development of an affordable housing complex in the town of Oasis in mid-2022 and \$279,000 in November to upgrade the Maria y Jose Mobile Home Park, in the same area.

In addition to the 74 families who have already been relocated from the mobile home park, the Oasis Housing Opportunity Program has so far received completed applications from another 78 families. The county is aiming for a turnaround time of around four weeks for those applications, according to Rodriguez.

Many families have relocated to the newer Mountain View Estates Mobile Home Park in Thermal, and officials have said over 800 affordable housing units will become available in the east valley area over the next few years.

## Local ‘humanitarian crisis’ has roots in California’s affordable housing shortage

But in the meantime, farmworkers and others in the east valley are still driven into Oasis Mobile Home Park and other unsafe housing conditions due to a lack of options. New residents who have moved into the park since Oct. 31, 2021 are not eligible to receive financial relocation assistance.

“The bottom line is that the situation at Oasis Mobile Home Park is a symptom of the broader housing crisis in our ecosystem. Families have to choose between safe and affordable housing, and it always falls on the line that families end up choosing what they can afford. And we have such a deficit supply of safe and affordable housing,” said Heather Vaikona, president and CEO of Lift to Rise, a Coachella Valley nonprofit focused on promoting housing policy and development.

As of August 2022, park owners were charging \$600 to rent individual mobile homes, mostly to farmworkers and their families. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the valley is over \$2,000 a month, according to Vaikona, which exceeds the average wage for many of the valley’s low-wage workers. The average income for Coachella Valley’s agricultural workers was just \$18,395 in 2020, according to the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, translating to roughly \$1,532 a month.

“Oasis Mobile Home Park is a particularly acute humanitarian crisis because of the conditions in which families live there. Oasis is one of many, many similar situations where folks are living, in not just standard conditions, but toxic and unsafe conditions, because of the lack of supply of housing that families can afford,” Vaikona continued.

The region has made progress on ramping up affordable housing production in recent years, according to Vaikona, with over 7,000 units of affordable housing in various stages of the development and approval process in the valley and more than 1,600 units under construction. But even that isn’t enough to catch up after years of lackluster affordable housing production in the desert: from 2010 to 2018, the Coachella Valley produced an average of 38 new units of affordable housing a year, according to Lift to Rise.

“All nine cities in the Coachella Valley, the county, and the dozens of organizations that work together with us have done a phenomenal job of accelerating the production of affordable housing,” Vaikona said. “But we cannot move fast enough, it’s next to impossible to move fast enough to address the width and the breadth of the challenge.”

*Previous reporting by Eliana Perez, Ema Sasic, and Christopher Damien was used in this story.*

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Raymond Cree Middle School

**Jesus Madrid Rojas**  
Rancho Mirage High School

**Palm Springs Police Chief Andy Mills**

**Logan Avila**  
Desert Hot Springs High School

**Rubi Garcia**  
Sunny Sands Elementary School

**Jersey Niro**  
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