



March 22, 2021

Subject: Additional Comments regarding Letter No. 8: CactusToCloud Institute

Dear Ms. Sauviat Criste,

We thank The City of La Quinta for your response to our comments regarding the Coral Mountain Resort Draft Environmental Impact Report, received on March 10, 2022. Based on this response, and after reviewing the final EIR and further reviewing referenced sections of the draft EIR in the response, we are providing additional comments for the consideration of the planning commission. The original comments and responses are provided verbatim alongside our additional comments, which are highlighted in bold for clarity.

Comment 8-a:

CactusToCloud values the opportunity to submit comments for the project above referenced, and we respectfully request you please share our comments with the La Quinta City Council. CactusToCloud is a group of desert advocates collaborating on community science and environmental education projects in the Coachella Valley, and our goal is to celebrate and protect our desert home. We represent diverse backgrounds and life experiences, and we are all UCR - Palm Desert California Naturalists and Climate Stewards. As it happens, we are also all homeowners in the City of La Quinta.

As concerned La Quinta residents, and given our training and time spent in our community, we consider it imperative that we, CactusToCloud, oppose this project, and we ask that the DEIR be revised to address the concerns contained in this letter, and other letters of concerned residents and conservation organizations.

Response 8-a:

The City thanks CactusToCloud for participating in the review of the Draft EIR. The commenter's opposition to the project is noted. The commenter's concerns are addressed in the comments below, and responses are included as Response 8-b through 8-d.



Additional Comment 8-a:

CactusToCloud thanks the City of La Quinta for continuing to facilitate the public comment process, and for their responses to our comment letter. We note the more than seven months it took to receive a response to our two page letter, compared to the less than two weeks community members are being given to review and provide substantive comment on the nearly-1000 page final Environmental Impact Report for the Coral Mountain Resort development. We hope The City will continue to improve the public comment process on this and future projects by providing adequate time and accommodation to community members who want to take part in the future of our great city.

Comment 8-b:

This project threatens to negatively impact the existing cultural, ecological, and recreational features in this area. Coral Mountain itself is a culturally and historically rich space, where Native American petroglyphs, intact honey mesquite hummocks, and the ancient Lake Cahuilla Shoreline are visible and accessible to our community. We are concerned irresponsible development of this area would damage these irreplaceable assets in our beautiful city, and that access to public lands will be limited.

Response 8-b:

A project-specific Cultural Report was conducted for the project site in order to provide the City with the necessary information and analysis to determine whether the proposed project would cause substantial adverse changes to any “historical resources,” as defined by CEQA, that may exist in or around the project area. The Cultural Report is provided in Appendix E of the Draft EIR, and summarized in Section 4.4 of the Draft EIR. As described in these documents, existing petroglyphs are known to occur adjacent to the site, at the base of Coral Mountain. As disclosed in the Draft EIR, at page 4.4- 14 – 4- 15 and 4.14- 11 – 4.14- 14, impacts to these historic features would be significant. As a result, the Draft EIR includes Mitigation Measure CUL-2, CUL-3, TCR-4, TCR-5, and TCR-6, which assure that these resources will be avoided and protected in situ.

In addition, the project applicant has agreed to provide a trail linkage across the open space in the southwestern portion of the site, in cooperation with the Desert Recreation District, which will also be located and fenced to protect the tribal cultural resources (rock art panels and bedrock milling features) located at the base of Coral Mountain. Please see pages 4.14- 11 – 4.14- 12, and Mitigation Measures TCR-4 and TCR-5, which



require both avoidance of this resource and a Rock Art Management Plan that is subject to review and approval by the ACBCI Tribal Historic Preservation Office. Therefore, the petroglyphs identified by the commenter have been protected by required mitigation and impacts to these cultural resources will be less than significant, as identified in the Draft EIR.

A project-specific Biological Report was also conducted for the project site in order to determine the existence or potential occurrence of special-interest plant and animal species within the study area and in the project vicinity. The Biology Report is provided as Appendix D.1 in the Draft EIR, and summarized in Section 4.3. As explained on page 4.3-21, the removal of the mesquite hummock on the project site does not conflict with any local plan or policy and is not a significant effect.

With respect to the ancient Lake Cahuilla shoreline that is visible along a portion of Coral Mountain, no development is proposed or allowed on any portion of Coral Mountain. As explained in the Topical Response on Biological Resources in Section 2.2.2, a sheep barrier will be installed on the project site that will separate the project development from Coral Mountain itself and the surrounding BLM open space. In addition, as described in Response No. 13-j below, the project is cooperating with the Desert Recreation District in providing a public trail connection through the southwestern portion of the project site, near the base of Coral Mountain, that will be on the project side of the sheep barrier. The ancient shoreline will remain visible to the public from this location

Additional Comment 8-b:

We thank the city for recognizing the impact the development will have on cultural resources found onsite, and for continuing the consultation process with local tribal governments. Because the project is relying on mitigation measures to reduce significant impacts, it is vital that property owners and contractors on site be held accountable to the measures enumerated in your Response 8-b. Mitigation measures will only be effective if they are enforced.

We have completed a cursory review of the referenced biological assessment in Appendix D.1, and have identified several errors in either listing incorrect species or omitting common species known to occur onsite. The substance of these errors does not involve special status or listed species and is unlikely to affect the legal requirements for the project, therefore we will not list them here. Rather, we consider these errors to be indicative of less than sufficient attention to detail,



and have further concerns about the timing and number of biological surveys conducted.

For instance, we were able to quickly locate botanical records for more than three times the number of species listed in the Appendix at or immediately adjacent to the project site. This is to be expected, based on the survey dates chosen, as fully 50 percent or more of desert plant species have an annual growth habit and may be undetectable for months or even years between substantial rain events. It is simply not possible to definitively determine the presence or absence of many desert species, including rare and special status plants, with two field visits in late April and early September.

Instead, we prefer to identify important ecosystem processes, habitat types, and linking corridors. In our opinion, these broad relationships between people, plants, animals, and the environment are more important than a narrow focus on individual species. While the removal of mesquite hummocks may not meet the legal definition of a “significant effect”, as per your response, they represent vital shelter and forage for wildlife and continue to be important to local indigenous cultures. Mesquites are disappearing from their historic range throughout the Coachella Valley due to development, and are even threatened inside of protected conservation areas by the overdrafting of groundwater. Given these factors, and the limited locations of the mesquite hummocks only on the periphery of the property, we ask they remain undisturbed in situ and be incorporated into the recreational and greenspace plans for this or any other future project that takes place on site, and that ground disturbance immediately around the mesquite hummocks be minimized.

Comment 8-c:

It is common knowledge that we are in the middle of one of the worst droughts in the history of our state. The use of our ever-diminishing water resources to fill and maintain a 20-acre basin would be short-sighted and does not consider reduced water availability during an unprecedented drought, or uncertain future conditions due to a changing climate. We fear the DEIR has not properly addressed this, and if this project is approved our community risks water shortages and similar water restrictions to those now in effect in other parts of our state.

California’s water board recently unanimously approved emergency regulations to temporarily stop thousands of landowners, residents and farmers alike, from using water from Sacramento –



San Joaquin Delta watershed. Consumers are now living with a 55 gallon per day per person per day allowance, and face penalties up to \$1000 per day, plus \$2500 per acre-foot, for illegally diverting water. Only through responsible use of water, both imported, and from our underground aquifer, can we avoid similar restrictions in La Quinta.

Response 8-c:

Please see the Topical Response, Water Resources, in Section 2.2.3 relating to the availability of water. A project-specific Water Supply Assessment/Water Supply Verification (WSA/WSV) was completed for the proposed project and uses. Per the WSA/WSV, the proposed project is expected to consume approximately 958.63-acre feet per year (AFY) based on the residential indoor demand, non-residential indoor demand, and outdoor demands of the project at buildout.

Additionally, the project is required to implement measures to conserve water as required by CVWD. Water conservation methods implemented by the project site include the installation and maintenance of efficient and drip irrigation systems for project landscape, the use of native plant materials and other drought tolerant plants, and the use of low-flush toilets and water-conserving showerheads and faucets. These methods will reduce indoor and outdoor water consumption by the project and the land uses that consume the bulk of the project's calculated water demand. The project is also subject to all existing and future water use restrictions imposed by the California State Water Resources Control Board or CVWD.

Additional Comment 8-c:

We specifically find The City's Response 8-c to be inadequate. Rather than address our concerns, the estimated water use of the project is simply restated, and water efficiency measures are improperly framed as an "additional" avenue for conservation - these should be included in the estimated use figure quoted in the response, or not mentioned at all. The City is either relying on incomplete information, or attempting to double count water efficiency measures.

We also feel the choice to present water use solely in units of acre feet per year (AFY) is inappropriate and potentially disingenuous in a document intended for public consumption. We prefer the addition or substitution of a more recognizable measurement: 958.63 AFY is more than three hundred million gallons (312,370,000, to be exact). Put another way, if the same water were being used to supply single family homes instead of a single private resort, it could



sustain more than 30,000 residents living water efficiently - almost a tenth of the resident population of the entire Coachella Valley.

Furthermore, the data presented in The City's own document, Section 2-27, project an overall reduction in groundwater storage of nearly 500 AFY, or a hundred and sixty million gallons, over the next fifty years. The only way current groundwater supplies can be shown to be sustainable is via state-wide water infrastructure projects that have not even been started. To count on these future supplies for projects approved today is to write a check we may never be able to cash - and force future residents to deal with the consequences.

Finally, we find The City's reliance on modeling for water availability projections to be insufficient. Scientific modeling can be an immensely useful tool for understanding complex systems, but no model is perfect and all require testing against real world conditions to evaluate their predictive value. Luckily, the state of California maintains robust water monitoring systems, and we therefore can see with remarkable clarity how much water is actually available in the real world. Over the last twenty years, California has experienced drought conditions in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020, and 2021, and are currently in an exceptional drought. Research from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory has shown that real world measurements of groundwater supplies in the Coachella Valley have continued to decrease, even with imported water being added back into the aquifer via recharge ponds in the west and east Coachella Valley, despite the optimistic models presented by The City. Just this week, the new rounds of cuts to municipal water supplies in the state have been announced. To rely on theoretical modeled future flows under these conditions is the equivalent of planning to remodel a house while the kitchen is on fire.

Comment 8-d:

While we oppose this specific project as presented, we support the responsible development of this site in general. Indeed, smart development around Coral Mountain has the potential to fulfill important community needs such as affordable housing, equitable access to public lands, and climate resilience planning (as required of city governments by SB 379). Any development should incorporate resilience best practices, such as community input and consideration of



environmental justice, sustainable water use, native plant landscaping, and outdoor recreational access to Coral Mountain, Boo Hoff Trail, and the Santa Rosa Wilderness.

Response 8-d:

Please see Response 8-c.

The project site will remain private property throughout the development and operation of the site. However, a public trail associated with the proposed Coral Mountain Interpretive Center trail designated by the Desert Recreation District Master Plan and future Coral Mountain Interpretive Center has been incorporated into project plans, as described on page 4.13-4 of the Draft EIR, and is documented in a letter agreement between the developer, CM Wave Development, LLC, and the Desert Recreation District, dated July 29, 2021, which is attached to this Final EIR as Appendix P. Accommodations for this trail shall be located along the approximate toe of Coral Mountain, within the designated conservation area at the southwestern edge of the property and on the project side of the proposed sheep barrier to avoid inviting threats to Peninsular bighorn sheep onto Coral Mountain. Assurance for public access is also provided in Mitigation Measure TRA-15 in the Draft EIR. Public access to the Boo Hoff Trail and the Santa Rosa Wilderness will not be impacted by the proposed project, as neither the Boo Hoff Trail nor the Wilderness area are on or adjacent to the project site, which is private property.

The commenter's position on resilience best practices, such as community input and consideration of environmental justice is noted. Community input has been sought and obtained throughout the planning process, including the public comment period provided for the Notice of Preparation, the public scoping meeting held for this EIR on March 30, 2021, circulation of the Draft EIR for public comment and the joint City Council/Planning Commission study session held on September 28, 2021. Environmental justice is a policy consideration but not a topic under CEQA.

Additional Comment 8-d:

The City's response here is unclear - the entire purpose of the environmental review process is to bring projects in line with NEPA, CEQA, and municipal regulations such as the General Plan. Whether the property is privately owned or not has no bearing on the decision making process, and The City is entirely within its rights to ask for changes to project design and/or deny approval of projects that are inconsistent with the above. We find no such substantial changes to the draft EIR in chapter three of the final EIR that satisfy our concerns.



We appreciate the willingness of the developer to cooperate with the continued development of the Coral Mountain Interpretive Center by Desert Recreation District, which is exactly the type of use we feel is appropriate for the site and strongly encourage. However, references to bighorn sheep fencing in your response do not appear to be directed at our comment - perhaps this was intended for one of many other comments opposed to this project received by The City?

In any case, we encourage The City to do more than “note” our position on climate resilient best practices and actively require them for project approval. We also hope The City will take environmental justice, and the health and well-being of all residents, into account in their planning efforts, whether or not CEQA specifically requires it.

Comment 8-e:

Instead of a surf park which is out of character with our desert, a development that not only preserves but enhances the natural and cultural heritage of our City would be an asset to the community. The CactusToCloud team is ready and interested in working with the City and developers to assist in the implementation of these features, and working together to build a resilient and inclusive community for people and wild plants and animals to thrive in the Coachella Valley.

Response 8-e:

The City of La Quinta thanks the CactusToCloud organization for participating in the EIR process. The project is proposed by private property owners, and the City will consider the proposal based on the goals and policies of the General Plan, and the information detailed in the EIR.

Additional Response 8-e:

We thank the city for their response and for facilitating the project consideration, environmental review, and public comment process. We remind The City that the project as currently proposed is not consistent with the General Plan and would require a General Plan Amendment to move forward. Therefore, it should be denied under the criteria laid out in your response above.



CactusToCloud Institute

As La Quinta residents, active members of the community, and desert naturalists, we see the need for additional housing, as well as the innumerable, environmental, social, and economic benefits of open space that are consistent with the existing General Plan for the project site. We remain supportive of responsible development in the Coral Mountain area, and working together to build a resilient and inclusive community for people and wild plants and animals to thrive in the Coachella Valley.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

CactusToCloud Institute

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