

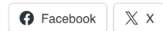
— COACHELLA VALLEY —
INDEPENDENT

Candidate Q&A: Three Candidates Compete to Become the First Representative of the Palm Desert City Council's New District 3



by Kevin Fitzgerald

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How long have you been a resident of District 3, and why are you running to become the first Palm Desert District 3 city council member?

To your first question, I first moved to the city of Palm Desert in 2014, and when I moved to the city of Palm Desert, I was living in what would now be considered District 2 prior to the redistricting. So, I've lived in the city of Palm Desert, and in



unincorporated areas of Palm Desert, since then. I moved to north Palm Desert late last year, prior to the redistricting that took place. That was a move I was very happy about, because I wanted to be closer to the freeway, of course, because I drive a lot for work. North Palm Desert, you know, is a growing area. It has a lot of amenities and services, but it definitely needs more. And now, as a north Palm Desert resident, I'm looking forward to working on behalf of my neighbors to ensure that the same amenities and the same services that we see in other parts of the city will also be here in north Palm Desert.

And then to part two: Why am I running? I'm running for Palm Desert City Council to represent north Palm Desert residents, because I believe that north Palm Desert needs a strong voice and advocate on the Palm Desert City Council. I, myself, am an educator. I teach at our local law school here in the city of Indio. I'm also a public-interest attorney, which means I work to expand access to justice for generally underserved communities. And I've been an advocate, a community advocate, in the Coachella Valley now for over 10 years. Advocacy is what I do. It is what is in my heart, to work on behalf of the community, to make sure that everyone has a voice and a say in determining the future of the place that we call home. That is why I'm running: to be an advocate for north Palm Desert residents.

What do you consider to be the top two issues confronting all Palm Desert residents, including your District 3 constituents?

If I had to boil it down to the top two issues, I would say public safety and supporting our seniors and working families. To the priority of public safety, look: Here in Palm Desert, we have a growing community, particularly in north Palm Desert, with approximately 7,000 new housing units, that'll bring 9,000 new residents. And so, it's no surprise that, as our population increases, we will also have a

need for more fire services and more police services. I think that is one of the main issues facing the city right now, and that has been discussed within the budget process. And looking at Measure G, which is on the ballot in November, we can (use that revenue to) continue to maintain and improve our services and the level of services that we are providing to Palm Desert residents. We're facing potential challenges with our budget in the coming years, as many cities are. And so, I think that quality of life means a city where we have safe neighborhoods, safe schools and safe businesses. I think I saw that there was a 30% increase in vehicle thefts in 2022 here in the city of Palm Desert. So, we definitely have some challenges that we need to tackle, because we want Palm Desert to continue to be a beautiful place to live for everyone, and part of that is making sure that our public safety apparatus is properly funded for the population increase that we are expecting to encounter here in the coming years.

Then, next I mentioned seniors and working families. Now, we know that there is an affordability problem. The economy has put many of our seniors and working families in a position where they don't know if they can continue to afford their housing. The cost of everything is going up, and especially here, where a majority amount of our population are seniors, and we also have working families here, too. So, I believe it is the responsibility of the city to be proactive in supporting communities that will be most impacted by the rising costs of everything, be it housing, be it groceries, or any of the things that we pay for to maintain our lifestyles. It is extremely important for the city to make it a priority to take the actions needed to ensure that our seniors and working families can continue to live in Palm Desert. It is absolutely a priority of mine.

Palm Desert voters are being asked to vote on Measure G, or the "Safety, Roads, City Services Measure" sales tax proposal, which calls

for a 1 cent increase in this tax. Do you support or oppose Measure G, and why?

First, I think we need to look at how we got here, as it concerns why city staff are recommending this particular one-cent sales tax measure. It is because the city is looking at a \$17 million deficit, long term, if we continue at the same sales tax rate that we have now. Palm Desert already has one of the lowest sales-tax rates in the valley, and now we have needs that have to be met, including public safety that I already mentioned. It's this growing demand and costs that have placed increased pressure on the city. You know, we have to maintain 911 emergency medical, police and fire response services. We have two fire stations right now that need to be updated, and a third station on the way that is going to need to be staffed. Additionally, with the expected population increase, we're going to need more law enforcement officers, and I think the number is actually three, to keep up with the needs of the community. We already know that, over the past several years, emergency response times have fallen. I believe in 2019, for priority one calls, the average time was less than six minutes. And, as of last year, it's over seven, and the average response time for any level of priority call is over 30 minutes, and those numbers keep going up every year. Now, that has to do with an increased number of calls. We have here one of the busiest fire stations in the country. Over 80% of those calls are for emergency services, and so we have to be able to maintain for Palm Desert residents our emergency medical, police and fire response times, and hopefully decrease them eventually. When people call 911, they expect that somebody is going to answer them, because they're going through a very scary moment. And, in my opinion, it's a disservice to the residents of Palm Desert not to do everything we can to make sure that the services that our residents expect are, in fact, provided. It is the city's responsibility to make sure that that happens. And so now we're faced with the question of: How

do we address this? We have the cost of public safety going up, and I know that the city did explore numerous other outlets for how to address this upcoming deficit that we're going to face. We're balanced for this year and next year, but moving forward, we're going to be taking more from our general-fund reserves, and so how do we address that? I think they explored options like increasing our TOT (transit occupancy tax), or increasing (Palm Desert's) Prop A fire tax, but the only method to address the increasing costs and supply chain issues that will impact the city—not just residents, but the city—was to introduce the sales tax measure.

My understanding of the sales tax measure is that 100% of the revenues generated from this tax would remain in Palm Desert. That would equate to approximately \$25 million which would be primarily used to maintain city service levels for police, fire, parks, public works, infrastructure, etc. Certain items are not going to be taxed including groceries, medical supplies, prescriptions, feminine products, diapers, things of that nature. And as I stated earlier, of the nine cities, Palm Desert has one of the lowest sales tax rates at 7.75%. So we're trying to confront this like many cities are, because we owe it to the residents to do what we can to make sure that we can maintain the excellent quality of life that they expect and deserve. And so based off of all of that information that has been provided by the city, Measure G does seem as if it is going to be a necessary move to maintain our budget and not to go into a deficit and drain down our general fund reserves year after year. It is not good long-term planning to allow that to happen without providing a solution.

Although there are thousands of new housing units under construction in District 3, there's a dearth of supermarkets, public safety facilities and services, schools and public transportation options to support the

anticipated increase in population over the next 2-3 years. How will you address these quality-of-life needs for your constituents?

Great question. Well, to your point, I've been out talking to a lot of voters, and we all share a very similar sentiment that north Palm Desert has a lack of services and amenities for residents. And, I'm going to tie that back to support for Measure B (which mandated the creation of five electoral districts within the city) that we voted on (and passed) in November of 2022. My understanding is that the majority of that support came from north Palm Desert, and I think there's a reason for that. Residents living here will tell you that we need more grocery stores. You know, we'd love to have a senior center. We'd love to have more green spaces, more areas that are walkable, a more walkable city, and definitely more access to health care services here locally. I've spoken to a number of residents who have shared with me that they cannot get doctor appointments anytime in the foreseeable future when they try to find doctors here. So, this is a big issue, and one of many, but again, we should absolutely have more grocery stores here in north Palm Desert.

Concerning public safety facilities, we do have the Sheriff's Department located off of Gerald Ford, which is here in north Palm Desert, and fairly close and accessible for residents. But again, we're also talking about fire stations, and Fire Station 102 is in the works now, and that will be coming as of next year right here in north Palm Desert. And rightfully so, because with as many as 7,000 new housing units and 9,000 new residents, we absolutely need to have a new fire station to meet the number of calls that are expected. We already know, and I mentioned it before, that we have currently one of the busiest fire stations in the nation, right here in Palm Desert. So, bringing that new fire station, I believe, is an excellent idea. It's a

necessary move to have a fire station here that is close enough so that it can respond to calls, and that response times are kept low.

Concerning the issue of schools, I was speaking with Riverside County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Edwin Gomez, who has endorsed me, about this issue. I had communicated to him that many families who I had spoken with, and have children in school, were not pleased with the distance that they had to travel. Particularly, I think it was for middle school students; if they were in the Palm Springs Unified School District, they have to go all the way to school in Rancho Mirage. Now to clarify, in north Palm Desert, part of the (electoral) district is in Desert Sands Unified School District, and the other part of the district is in PSUSD. So, for those families who are located in the PSUSD part of the district, they find that they have to leave much earlier to bring their kids to school, and the students have to leave even earlier if they're taking the bus. And so, I think it's a very important conversation to have. We need to work with our partners at the county level and determine how we can bring more schools to meet the needs of our families with children.

And lastly, public transportation and transportation equity are subjects that I have been talking about a lot, but I certainly didn't start that conversation. In attending City Council meetings, I have heard and seen numerous individuals make public comment about how it is very inconvenient for somebody who is riding the bus to get around Palm Desert, particularly in north Palm Desert. And I know that to be true, because during my time as a housing manager, I was housing seniors here in the city of Palm Desert, and this issue came up for one particular client. She loved her unit. She was so happy, because she had been unhoused for 11 years and was finally going to be able to settle in. So, she said, "How close is the bus?" She was 61 years old at the time, and she did not have a (driver's) license. She went

everywhere on foot or took the bus. And we drove and looked, and the closest bus stop was not anywhere close to her apartment. Of course, she continued with that unit, because she didn't want to be living outside anymore. So, of course, she was going to accept it, but just to get to the grocery store required her to walk a very long distance, longer than she should have had to walk. So, I share that anecdote and the public comments that I've heard about the issue, which indicate that Palm Desert is not viewed as a city that's very bus-rider friendly. But I believe that working closely with our partners in the community, particularly SunLine, we can determine how to become a place where you can ride the bus, or you can drive your car, but both are efficient, comfortable methods by which one can get to their doctor's appointments, to the grocery store, or to school. Because right now, I imagine that most residents here do own cars, but not everybody does. And if we want to make it easier for people to improve their lives by going to school, but you can't easily get from one side of the city to the other in order to go to class, or if you have to leave for work hours ahead of time, and you can't work a shift that goes very late because the bus does not run very late, these things limit your options. So I think that continuing to work with SunLine and making sure they are aware of what residents are saying concerning the issue of transportation, I believe, is a responsibility of the City Council person, and it will certainly be a priority of mine. The goal is not to make things more difficult for people. It's to try and find solutions that work for them.

What steps should the city of Palm Desert take to address homelessness, both from a city and a valley-wide perspective, especially in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's recent Grants Pass decision?

As a housing and homelessness advocate for the past 10 years, I love this question. I manage the housing program at the Coachella Valley Rescue Mission, and I manage the Housing First program at the Coachella Valley Association of Governments. I sit on the board of governance for the Riverside County Continuum of Care, which oversees all of our (Housing and Urban Development Department) and state funding that comes through the county to nonprofits and government agencies. Those funds go toward helping the most vulnerable in our communities. I've done street outreach. I've done case management. I've done housing navigation, homelessness prevention, and anything you can think of, I have done, and, one thing I've learned during those 10 years is that you have much better outcomes when you directly engage with individuals experiencing homelessness at their level. Meet them at their level, but never forget their humanity. People can tell you exactly what it is that they need, and it's our job in those circumstances to provide those services. But very often, we try and apply one-size-fits-all solutions to this very, very difficult issue to tackle.

And I can tell you, we didn't solve it. During the past years I was working on it, we definitely did some amazing work, and housed hundreds of people across the valley, but it's a very complicated issue. And so, what steps should the city take? I would say that one step that the city has already taken, which I am very supportive of, is working with City Net for outreach services. So, if an individual is unhoused in the city of Palm Desert, they can contact one of the City Net case managers who will connect with them where they're at, and then connect them with services and housing, amongst other things. But I will add that working with our nonprofit partners is one of the most proven-to-be effective ways to address homelessness. Nonprofits know how to do this work. They've been doing it for a long time. They are more tied into, and familiar with, the community that we are trying to

assist. So I would be a huge proponent of increasing the amount of collaboration that we do with the Coachella Valley Rescue Mission and CVAG, as well as increasing capacity for City Net involvement to the extent possible based on potential budget restrictions, tapping into our opiate settlement funds and finding creative ways to engage with our partners to get this done. I think that is more effective than the government, or in this case the city, trying to tackle the issue itself. And, of course, affordable housing has to be part of this conversation, because for unhoused people, finding a unit that they can afford and maintain for the long term is extremely difficult.

I sit on the board of the Community Housing Opportunities Corporation which brought the first affordable housing development to the city of Palm Springs in over 14 years. That's the Monarch Apartments in the city of Palm Springs, and also the Dolores Huerta development in the city of Coachella. And while we have over 1,000 affordable housing units coming to the city of Palm Desert that are extremely important and will be a great benefit to the community, at the rate that individuals and families are falling into homelessness based on the affordability crisis, we have to do more. I'm a big believer in not just doing the bare minimum, but let's exceed expectations where we can.

What's your favorite relaxation activity in Palm Desert?

I do enjoy playing tennis, and going to Civic Center Park and walking around. I do that with my father when it's not so hot outside. We go, and we just walk around and around at Civic Center Park. I really just enjoy being outside. The desert is such a beautiful place, and Palm Desert is such a beautiful place where we can enjoy being outside, and hiking, and really just tapping into nature. So, when the weather allows, I really enjoy just being outside.

I also play golf. So, I'll play golf with my father sometimes. I don't play good golf, so I'll make that point. It's not good golf, but I've got my clubs, and I get out there. So, I enjoy doing that with him as well. It's a very nice opportunity for families to come together and be outside, and it's also good for the overall health of the community, and that's something that I very much enjoy.